CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE: 
THE GSP IN PHILADELPHIA’S URBAN LANDSCAPE

In October 1967, the GSP board of directors decided that the society should “remain at its present location.” At the same time, the board urged all members to do what they could “to overcome the . . . disadvantages” of its location. They planned to improve facilities so that the society would “become a point of attraction not only for the membership but for the community at large as well.”¹ Three months later, at the 203rd anniversary celebration, the German Society unveiled a $350,000 four-year redevelopment model for a “cultural center” that was to include “a 450 seat auditorium, . . . dinner club facilities [with] luncheon and dinner memberships available to the businessmen and residents of the neighborhood, a multi-tiered landscaped garden, a basketball court and parking areas.”² In addition, “a children’s library of American books, to serve the children of our neighbors irrespective of color or national origin” was planned.³ By the fall of 1971, only the basement conversion into a German-style Ratskeller, an expanded, unpaved parking lot, and a small garden were completed. Moreover, the librarian complained that fewer people used the library, “which she attribut[ed] to a fear of the neighborhood.”⁴

The continuing deterioration of the Spring Garden area, as well as changing GSP membership and leadership, turned the society into an ethnic social club with limited appeal. Federal and local urban policies from the 1940s to the ’80s only made things worse. Under the auspices of the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the one and two-bedroom Fairmont Manor Apartments were built literally right next to the GSP almost overnight in 1969. In the late 1980s, a new group of professionals trained in fund-raising for non-profit organizations and some very dedicated academics became involved in the ambitious building project, helping the GSP overcome a chronic shortage of funds, and the building was finally renovated. Starting in 1995, a five-year library cataloging, restoration, and microfilming project constituted the foundation of what promised to become a valuable scholarly resource. Financial setbacks, internal disagreements over what the society should be, and personality clashes, however, have prevented this promise from being fulfilled.

Housing the Society

The German Society has always been intertwined with the changing landscape of Philadelphia. The waxing and waning of German immigration, along with changes in the neighborhood, have influenced the society’s
effectiveness in helping newly arrived German immigrants and local German Americans, and in providing a gathering place for the middle-class Deutschtum. The GSP was originally founded at the German Lutheran Schoolhouse at Cherry and Fourth Streets located two doors down from Philadelphia’s first Jewish place of worship. The schoolhouse was close to the center of the city’s heterogeneous business and residential life. Members continued to meet there until the society finally succeeded in financing its own building on Seventh and Market Streets in 1807.

Right from the start, the GSP rented out some of the Seventh Street building. Some of the tenants paid for enlarging and remodeling the hall over the next few decades. In November 1856, a fire in an adjacent building spread to the GSP, damaging the library and the hall, and completely destroying the agent’s office. That same year, the Gas Company became the society’s sole tenant. In 1866, it paid to replace the building with a larger one in exchange for relatively inexpensive rent and fees. The remodeling project benefited the library since floor-to-ceiling walnut bookcases were purchased and a gallery was installed.

Until the 1840s, the Seventh Street building was an ideal central location. Philadelphia was then still a walking city with no clear ethnic settlement patterns nor a strict separation between residential and commercial areas. In the mid-nineteenth century, German immigration to Philadelphia increased dramatically, and in 1854, the municipality was enlarged. The northern section became at least 50 percent German, and the GSP decided to relocate to the Spring Garden location bordering the Northern Liberties neighborhood in 1888.

The move to the Spring Garden location came rather late, however, since German immigrants had been settling in the Northern Liberties area for about three decades by then. In 1882, Lutheran pastor and GSP member Wilhelm Julius Mann had warned the society that it could “scarcely hope to gain many more new members” as long as it remained in its old location since the center of German activity and commerce in the city had moved too far from there. Mann was very familiar with the local Deutschtum and its general movement toward the north of the city. A minister at St. Michaels and Zion Lutheran Church, and after 1867 professor of the Lutheran seminary, Mann had witnessed the sale of the old cemetery at Fifth and Cherry Streets and the emergence of St. Paulus Church in the Northern Liberties as an independent congregation in those years.

This move was expected to offer more space for the library, the agent’s office, and the housekeeper’s quarters, as well as provide a hall with good acoustics to attract new members and improve the society’s ability to serve poor German immigrants. Financially, the relocation was advantageous: the old building was sold for $75,000, and the existing
townhouse at Spring Garden Street cost a mere $28,000. After much haggling, the GSP agreed to spend an additional $32,600 for some necessary renovations and a new building adjacent to the townhouse.11

Soon after the groundbreaking ceremony [Figure 6] and the subsequent grand opening celebration in December 1888, however, problems became apparent.12 The visually beautiful glass cupola at the center of the library ceiling leaked when it rained, and its flimsy construction made heating the room nearly impossible. Moreover, the support columns in the auditorium were unattractive. For more than a decade, GSP members and leaders complained. Following its traditional frugality, the society did not begin renovations until after the newly formed Women’s Auxiliary organized a successful fund-raising bazaar in November 1901, which generated the required funds.

Over the next century, the building continued to pose challenges for the society. In 1941, the glass dome was finally removed,13 and eventually the decorative balconies on the west and south sides of the building were demolished. The heating system continues to be problematic even now, despite a recent, extensive three-million-dollar renovation. Additional restrooms and an elevator to the third-floor library remain desiderata.14

An even more important challenge than the condition of the building, however, has been its location for the past century. As early as 1919, the
society realized that the Spring Garden Street location had become out-of-date, just as the Seventh Street location had. The economic success of those who had arrived earlier, together with improved public transportation and the increasing use of the automobile, had facilitated the move of many Germans to the northeastern part of the city. Declining German immigration in general, and rising Eastern and Southern European immigration into the Northern Liberties neighborhood, also augmented this trend. Thus, potential GSP members, as well as some of those the society was supposed to help, began to live miles away. GSP director John Fahrenwald, who was also a successful businessman, raised the matter at a board meeting, and a committee was formed to “sell the present building . . . [and] to look for a hall in a better area.”

In the end, no suitable buyer was found, so the issue was dropped.

Another reason the GSP had hoped to move was that the neighborhood in general was changing. Since the 1870s, the area around Spring Garden Street had witnessed the rise of heavy industry in its midst, the declining real estate value of residential properties, and the disappearance of the market stalls between Twelfth and Seventh Streets, which had been the center of shopping and community activity in the neighborhood. Spring Garden Street was not initially intended to be a thoroughfare to the Delaware River: it ended at Fifth Street until 1925, when it was finally connected to the commercially important riverfront. [Figure 7] A banner at a parade on October 16, 1925, advertised: “Spring Garden
Street: The MAIN Street EAST and WEST: WATCH IT DEVELOP.” Local business owners and perhaps those cheering at the parade hoped that the straight run to the port area would bring commercial benefits to the neighborhood. The advent of the Great Depression and post-World War II deindustrialization dashed these hopes, and many white Philadelphians fled the city.17

From at least 1919, the GSP was well aware of the negative repercussions its address had on membership numbers, attendance at its cultural events, and its ability to serve its constituents. Germans were moving progressively to outlying areas.18 In 1936, board members blamed the “increasingly detrimental location of our building” for the “small if attentive audience” at many of its events.19 A decade later, after the devastating war, a special nine-member committee urged the society to move to Olney,

where the bulk of our present and future members live.... Only there could social expansion and increased membership be successfully procured.... Such a move [is] not only essential, but directly beneficial to our library and related activities, because it would make it more valuable to a greater number of those most interested.20

This forceful appeal to move was not heeded. In 1950, the society resolved to paint all the building’s rooms instead.21 Two years later, however, the annual Pastorius celebration took place in Olney.22

Other German clubs in Philadelphia were similarly confronted with the issue of changing location. Of the twenty-seven German clubs, singing Vereine, and societies (including the GSP) that advertised regularly in Philadelphia’s only remaining German-language newspaper in the post-World War II period, most were located in sections of Philadelphia that were transforming rapidly.23 The Cannstatter Volksverein, for example, moved from its Center City building to a seven-acre Northeast Philadelphia location in 1947.24

The GSP raised the question of moving to a different neighborhood again in 1953. Board members were concerned not only that Germans had left the Spring Garden area, but also that “Buddhists” had settled in the neighborhood. Apparently, the proximity to Philadelphia’s Chinatown, which had become a recognized neighborhood by the mid-1920s, caused some members to wonder “how the Society could protect itself” from “such a group” dominating them and possibly taking control of the building.25 Although these fears were unfounded, the subsequent relocation discussion lasted for over a year. It was again set aside without any solution when finding a new home for the library appeared to be impossible.26

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE
Federal Housing Projects and the GSP

Apprehensions about the neighborhood were not alleviated, however. In 1954, GSP treasurer Herman Witte inquired about the city’s plans to build “several large, low cost apartment projects” in the vicinity. By then, the Redevelopment Authority of Philadelphia, created in 1945 as a result of a federal mandate, had issued a plan for the East Poplar area that envisioned a mixed-use neighborhood with heterogeneous residents. As opposed to the Philadelphia Housing Authority, also federally funded, the Redevelopment Authority did not only concentrate on creating low-income housing. In addition, it tried to rehabilitate decaying neighborhoods by purchasing properties and then reselling them to private companies at a reduced cost under the condition that they redevelop the area.

The GSP decided in 1954 to become part of the redevelopment plan. It also intended to build a small park on land it hoped to purchase from the Redevelopment Authority, with room for monuments to honor “outstanding German Americans.” Thirteen years later, the redevelopment project still had not come to fruition. Frequent and often cantankerous correspondence between the GSP and city authorities reveals that both were to blame. Indeed, the slow pace was not unusual: experts in the field of redevelopment find that despite “the accomplishments of the various housing agencies . . . deterioration proceeded faster than rehabilitation.”

In August 1967, recently elected GSP President C.R. Walther Thomas posed the issue of moving one last time to the GSP membership. The visionary president described the Spring Garden neighborhood as “neither congenial, attractive, nor hospitable.” He also noted that few members made regular use of the library and that the facilities on Spring Garden Street were also seldom used, “except for regularly programmed events.” Thomas was not exaggerating. The neighborhood had been designated as one of the blighted areas of the city in need of rehabilitation, and the townhouse adjacent to the GSP building and many other structures in the area had long been abandoned; many were boarded up. Some, like the townhouse next door, had been broken into and were “used for nocturnal pleasantries” by neighborhood youths.

At the same time, Thomas outlined an alternative redevelopment plan but was concerned about the future of the organization at the Spring Garden location and whether better facilities would engender more support from present and new members. Acknowledging the broader contemporary problem of race riots, Thomas wondered whether “American cities like Philadelphia [would] continue to experience such ordeals as Newark, Detroit and Milwaukee.” Thomas himself seemed willing to
remain at the Spring Garden location and change the role of the society within its community: he anticipated that the society would “sooner or later have to become an active participant in solving local communal problems.” But he left it up to the membership to decide.

Many GSP leaders and members, especially older ones, did not like what Thomas suggested. Otto Woltersdorf, a former GSP lawyer and longtime member, and Herman Witte, a recent GSP president, were among them. Witte quipped to Woltersdorf that he “never knew that one man [Thomas] could so quickly create so many problems, and incur so much enmity in so doing.” Only few outspoken and relative newcomers to the GSP had the courage to face Witte, including Ludwig Honold, a successful and wealthy businessman. Reminding Witte that the question before the board was whether to move or stay, Honold chastised the older man as “unable or unwilling to comprehend...some rather momentous problems.” In response to Witte’s detail-oriented concerns about how best to remodel the existing building, Honold squarely told Witte that, “what really ails the Society cannot be cured by any architect.”

The ultimate question was whether the society should move to an area where it would not have to confront the urban crisis or stay and become part of the solution, and the outcome was less than decisive. Of the approximately 145 members who replied to the questionnaire sent out by the GSP, 74 voted to stay, thus outnumbering members who favored a move by merely 3 votes. However, members did commit to this choice by pledging over $25,000 to support the redevelopment project. While the arguments for relocating were explained quite clearly by Thomas and others, the arguments for staying in the Spring Garden building were never spelled out. Many members who had arrived as refugees after World War II seemed reluctant to let go of the German home they had found and created at Spring Garden Street. Still, this decision would have profound consequences as the neighborhood continued to change.

The redevelopment of the East Poplar area where the GSP is located never became the socially and racially heterogeneous neighborhood with plenty of green spaces and playgrounds amidst low-rise structures that planners had envisioned. Instead, as elsewhere, planned low-income housing became low-cost construction. The new residents thoroughly transformed the neighborhood around the GSP in the three decades following World War II. Eastern European and German immigrants, who had made up around 60 percent of the area’s residents in 1940, left and were replaced by African Americans, who made up 93.3 percent of the residents in the Spring Garden section by 1970. Poverty was rampant. But these problems were not unique to the East Poplar area, or even to Philadelphia.
Urban problems were so widespread that urban planning became an academic field in the 1940s. Government officials and scholars agreed that federally funded public housing was necessary for rebuilding the nation’s cities: slum clearance could only become a reality if “short-term, low-income housing” could be provided to the nation’s poorest segment. The Housing Act of 1949 codified this vision and appropriated federal money so that local redevelopment offices could buy properties in blighted areas, clear the land, and make it available to private developers. The law also required cities to construct housing for the poor who would be displaced. Thus, public housing and redevelopment were to go hand in hand.  

The Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority included federally funded housing projects in the central city in their general redevelopment plan. Like all redevelopment projects, this one emphasized the creation of housing through “code enforcement, housing rehabilitation, and citizen involvement.” Each target area consisted of about fifty-block squares that were believed to be manageable. Philadelphia’s Redevelopment Authority was officially committed to providing racially integrated housing. Planners hoped to accomplish this by mixing low-income housing with middle-class homes. They decided on building sites and architectural features and also considered the character of the people to be relocated. Studies and experience had identified so-called problem families—troublemakers, alcoholics, families with too many or unruly children, criminals, and prostitutes—who needed to be kept out because of their potential to ruin the entire low-income project. But in the end, tenants so identified were also placed in projects. As a result, the trend to regard low-income housing as a permanent dead end for undesirable elements of society increased, even though the projects had been intended as a temporary solution for upwardly mobile, hard-working people.

Increasing racial tensions nationwide only made matters worse. In the 1950s, African Americans were largely excluded from owning private, single-family homes. In 1960, more than three-quarters of all Philadelphia blacks lacked the minimum annual income of $4,000 necessary to become homeowners. Clashes between blacks and whites turned transitional neighborhoods into war zones as blacks demanded inclusion and whites resisted. White neighborhoods selected as sites for public housing projects fiercely objected that property values would decline if “undesirables,” meaning African Americans, were admitted. In the protests, home-ownership was portrayed as a virtue that would be endangered if low-income renters entered the community. By the mid-1960s, blacks constituted 95 percent of most Philadelphia housing projects and public housing projects had become part of the problem instead of part of the solution to urban renewal. In areas where public housing projects had been built, private investment had not followed as had been originally
hoped. In the 1970s, grass-roots efforts and government encouragement raised tenant participation in public housing management. Nevertheless, housing projects had become “warehouses for the poor” whose residents were mostly black and, more often than not, single mothers with children. Philadelphia’s mayor Frank Rizzo, elected in 1971, reinforced the racial segregation in public housing. Rizzo was firmly committed to retaining black ghettos and keeping public housing, now synonymous with poor blacks, out of white neighborhoods. His five-year fight to prevent a public housing project from being built in the predominantly Italian South Philadelphia neighborhood that constituted his main political support only ended with a U.S. Supreme Court decision requiring the project to be built.42 Again, federal housing policies directly affected the GSP when a federal housing project, the Fairmont Manor Apartments, was constructed directly adjacent to the GSP building in the spring of 1969. GSP President Thomas protested that “the erection of low rental, federally subsidized housing” constituted a breach of the agreement with the Redevelopment Authority, which had intended to build or rehabilitate “88 houses which were to become privately owned.” [Figure 8] Homeownership, according to Thomas, would “stabilize, maintain and improve a fully integrated neighborhood.” A low-income housing project, on the other hand, might result in “a serious weakening of our position when we seek funds to finance our own plans.” Thomas claimed that the GSP had “the best of neighborly relationship with the Black families who live in modest, comfortable housing directly adjoining the property,” but that the introduction of a housing project would bring “people who have no roots in the community” and who “are economically insecure, dependent on public support, and culturally disadvantaged.” In other words, residents of the Fairmont Manor Apartments would be the antithesis of desirable neighbors.43 Thus, Thomas echoed the common rhetoric of white homeowners opposed to low-income developments.

In January 1969, the GSP, as part of the East Poplar Neighborhood Committee and in conjunction with the Quaker Lawyers Committee, had filed a lawsuit against HUD to stop construction.44 Ten months later, however, the buildings had been completed, and the judge ruled that it was “too late to effect any change in this particular development.” The Neighborhood Committee’s worst fears quickly came true. It was reported in October 1969 that “the East Poplar area [had] become the scene of an intensive narcotics traffic,” to which “the local or federal authorities . . . had” not adequately responded.45

In the fall of 1969, the GSP’s troubles got worse when the decrepit townhouse next door, which it had purchased as part of the redevelopment plan, was torn down. Soon neighborhood children were playing on
the property. The GSP discussed turning the space into an enlarged parking lot with a garage for the business manager’s son-in-law since his car had “been repeatedly vandalized by neighborhood denizens.” In 1973, the GSP board reported that the Philadelphia Police Department “consider[ed] the East Poplar Area to be dangerous because of the high con-
centration of residents who are drug addicts.” When one was found in the GSP building, the board decided to lock the front door on Spring Garden Street during business hours and to install an intercom system that would enable the librarian to let in visitors.47

Break-ins, car burglaries, and robberies occurred repeatedly just outside the building over the next two decades, increasing rather than alleviating members’ fear of the neighborhood.48 Starting in the 1970s, the GSP began to hire security guards for the parking lot during events. By 1990 the hourly rate of $11.50 for these guards was more than the wages earned by the librarian.49 With the addition of a wrought-iron fence, electric gate, surveillance cameras, and a twelve-foot concrete wall built in the early 1990s “providing protection from the housing project,” the GSP turned into a secure compound rather than a place open to neighbors, visually solidifying its reputation as unapproachable.50

Beyond Finding a Home: Internal GSP Issues to the Present

Even before the GSP finally decided to stay at its Spring Garden location in August 1967, it faced a number of problems aside from its address, including generational and philosophical ones. Already in March 1967, then newly elected President Thomas had come up with a list of issues confronting the GSP. Membership numbers had declined below 300, in part because there was little interest among “second and third generation families of German descent in the library, lectures and other endeavors.” Moreover, the original mission of the society, helping “needy or distressed Germans,” had become obsolete, “hence the benevolent aspect of the Society’s existence [was] of very limited appeal to potential supporters of the Society.” Moreover, GSP activities were “confined to an age group beyond forty and even fifty.”51 The new president also recognized that the society’s financial resources would probably enable it to carry on for quite some time without any real change. However, in order to turn the GSP into a growing, relevant, and vital institution once again, members had to find “new directions . . . with the expressed courage to disregard some traditions” that had become as meaningless as “‘holy cows’ in India.” Thomas proposed to start by “un-cluttering” the library, and “render[ing] some services to the immediate community.”52

Shortly after the final decision to remain at the Spring Garden location was made, President Thomas offered a remarkably realistic analysis of the society’s condition and a far-reaching vision for its future. Reminding everyone that “the Society could not escape the unalterable facts of its geographical location and the legacy of an anti-German feeling engendered by two World Wars . . .,” he suggested that “the Society could serve the immediate neighborhood by maintaining a library of English
language books for the local children, or possibly by providing a counseling service employing senior students from local universities.” As Dean of Instruction at Philadelphia’s Community College only ten blocks from the German Society, Thomas seems to have had a unique understanding of Philadelphia’s urban challenges, but he ended up alone within the GSP in his willingness to address those problems. His case for transforming the society from a purely ethnic organization to a social and cultural benevolent institution open to neighborhood residents fell on deaf ears. Instead, members grumbled about the younger generation’s “excessive materialism,” alleged badmouthing of the society by members of the German-American community for its “supercilious[ness],” and the lack of awareness of the society’s existence among Americans of German descent.

Thomas stepped down as GSP president in 1970 when he accepted a job as provost at a college in Pennsylvania’s interior. The next two presidents, John Huberti and Ludwig Honold, also tried to change the German Society. Huberti’s goals for the society, for example, were to “heal any schisms between cliques,” “gain back worthwhile members” who had left out of “apathy or discontent,” and improve the society’s “standing in the community as a whole.” But like Thomas, Huberti and Honold met with little success. It was not until the election of American-born George Beichl that the GSP found a leader who was able to unite most members for nearly twenty years.

Under the leadership of George Beichl, as well as Elfriede Sonnenberg, the heart and soul of the GSP during her thirty-year tenure as business manager and housekeeper from 1967 to 1997, the GSP attracted a tight-knit group of mostly elderly members. These men and women were especially attracted to the GSP for its annual New Year’s Eve parties, German-style Carnival celebrations, and other amusements. Luncheons for newly sworn-in citizens hosted by the GSP were controversial, however. The luncheons were inaugurated in 1967 and occurred annually until 1976, and then again in the 1980s through 1989. Because there were few Germans among the new citizens present, members were divided over the usefulness of the event. In 1968 already, only ten of the seventy new citizens were German or Austrian. At the time, GSP leaders believed that favorable press coverage would benefit the society in general. By 1974, GSP treasurer Anton Meidhof, concerned about the growing deficit, reminded fellow board members that the event cost more than $100 and doubted whether it benefited “the German cause.” Beichl argued in 1982 that the event “was related to the original immigrant-related aim of the Society” and offered the GSP “a chance to shine as a public spirited organization, which does not restrict its interest to Germans,” but after
1989, the membership was no longer convinced and the luncheons stopped. 58

Beichl inaugurated a newsletter during his presidency that he wrote and edited almost single-handedly. It became a good forum for the requests for assistance that now occasionally came to the society. About a dozen young women and men in Germany wrote each year searching for temporary employment, such as au-pair positions, or short-term lodgings free of charge for vacations or study abroad plans, and many found accommodations or jobs. 59 The newsletter also allowed Beichl and other society members to reproach the media for emphasizing Nazi atrocities rather than anti-Nazi resistance when dealing with Germany’s recent past. 60 Beichl used every opportunity to highlight the resistance movement and to admonish the media for failing to acknowledge the atrocities committed in the Soviet Union. 61 His refusal to address the Holocaust was agreeable to many members who were German World War II refugees still coping with their own ordeals.

As a second-generation German American, Beichl’s pride in his ethnic heritage led him to emphasize German contributions to American history adamantly. He was also intent on making the GSP the center of Philadelphia’s upcoming bicentennial celebration of the U.S. in 1976 and the tricentennial of the founding of Germantown in 1983. 62 The city of Philadelphia was not particularly successful in staging the bicentennial of the nation, but the German Society was quite successful in staging the tricentennial of Germantown. 63 Under Beichl’s leadership and in the absence of German diplomatic representation in Philadelphia, the GSP became the central address for German and American dignitaries coordinating events. In June 1983, Vice-President George Bush, Philadelphia Mayor Green, Beichl, and others visited Krefeld to commemorate the departure of the thirteen Krefeld families who became the first German settlers in America. On October 6, Germany’s President Carstens, Krefeld’s Mayor Pützhofen, and a delegation from the German Bundestag met Vice-President Bush and other U.S. representatives at Philadelphia’s Franklin Plaza Hotel for an elegant dinner with 1,500 invited guests to mark the 300th anniversary of the Krefeld families’ arrival. Frank Trommler, head of the German Department at the University of Pennsylvania and member of the GSP library committee, organized a four-day “Tricentennial Conference of German-American History, Politics and Culture” at the University of Pennsylvania, which underscored Philadelphia’s significance for the history of the German Americans. 64

Although the society contributed only a few thousand dollars for these events, it topped the list of sponsors and made German government officials aware of its existence. 65 Beichl had envisioned early on that the tricentennial would provide “a golden opportunity for the Germans to do
something—in striking an image, raising visibility.” And Beichl was determined “to maximize on it.” After the festivities, Beichl and others merely lamented that “the echo in the German press” had been distorted by German reporters’ “inability to appreciate the nature of our Tricentennial celebration.” An editorial in Die Zeit, for example, saw the festivities as a missed opportunity to talk about current problems in U.S.-German relations and deemed the congratulatory sentiments “slightly embarrassing, slightly untruthful.” For Beichl, this criticism detracted from the historic commemoration. Nevertheless, Beichl and the GSP continued to nurture contacts with German officials carefully in the years to come that would result in substantial financial support for the library and building renovation projects a decade later.

After a decade as GSP president, Beichl in 1984 accepted his re-election on the condition that the board agree to hire a “part-time executive director” to “answer the mail and handle the details that are involved in all the activities of the society.” Barbara Lang, a recent Ph.D. graduate from Germany, was finally found to fill this position in the fall of 1986. She would be instrumental in raising the society’s awareness of its potential as a research center for German-American history. Lang had arrived as an intern sponsored by the Center for North American Research in Frankfurt a year earlier and was quickly appalled by the conditions in the library. She lamented “the sad physical state of many of [the] important books and newspapers,” the lack of a sprinkler system, humidity control, and vermin control, and predicted that without proper measures “to conserve [the society’s] German-American treasures, a large number of [the] 18th and 19th century books will simply turn to dust, and will join the other vanished thoughts of the past.”

Smart, educated, and full of enthusiasm, Lang threw herself into creating well-thought-out exhibits for the GSP with topics ranging from the German roots of Christmas celebrations in the U.S. to the history of brewing. The dynamic woman also attracted new, younger members to the society with the institution of the young associates program. Moreover, Lang taught the board about modern fund-raising requirements, emphasizing the society’s need to clarify its identity and goals. After a year of hard work, Lang “requested that her duties, salary and title be reevaluated.” Following an embarrassing disagreement over travel expenses Lang had incurred while traveling to Germany, in part to secure funds for GSP projects, her pay was grudgingly adjusted to $19,800 per year, which was about 10 to 20 percent less than the starting salary of an assistant professor in the humanities at the time. A few months later, Lang left but not before participating in an ambitious fund-raising effort that ultimately resulted in the three-million-dollar library and building project.
The Library Project, 1994–1999

Begun in earnest in 1994, the project was initially assessed in 1987 by people from the Max Kade Institute. Frank Trommler and Dr. Elliot Shore, the librarian at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, had established contacts there. In preparation for the renovations, the English-language collection and many recently donated books were packed up in more than 1,000 boxes and sent to a warehouse in New Jersey in the fall of 1989. Trommler and Shore were instrumental in securing the funds necessary for cataloging and restoring the library mainly with monies from German foundations and the German Foreign Ministry. A separate fund drive, directed chiefly at American foundations, was initiated for the restoration of the library hall and roof of the 1888 building. Together both men wrote countless grant applications, ultimately garnering the support of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation in Cologne, the Robert Bosch Foundation in Stuttgart, the German Foreign Office in Bonn, and the University of Pennsylvania, among others.

The entire project lasted five years and did not commence without having to overcome some major challenges. For example, funds promised by the Kulturstiftung of North Rhine-Westphalia ended up being diverted to the states of former East Germany upon Germany’s reunification. In addition to the obvious problem of raising enough money from various organizations, GSP members themselves had to come up with $300,000 over the course of five years to fund both the library and building renovation. It was only through the tireless efforts of the fund-raising committee involving personal phone calls to potential donors and the generous support of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Barthelmes, a philanthropically inclined couple from Oklahoma, as well as some charitable local GSP members, that this substantial sum was raised. Another hurdle was the discovery that the renovation of the building roof would be much costlier than first assumed, due to severe cost-cutting measures in the original construction of 1888. After the drop-ceiling of the 1950s was removed, the cupola of the library ceiling was restored to its original shape. [Figure 9]

Internal society politics only complicated the project. President George Beichl and his board fought hard to stay in charge of the entire project for fear of losing control over the library, especially because Beichl deeply distrusted academics. In 1993, Bernard Freitag was elected GSP president. A high school German teacher, Freitag brought the society into the modern era of non-profit cultural organizations and taught members to approach challenges systematically as well-defined projects for which funds can be raised.

The library project resulted in some significant accomplishments. Catalogers made the holdings public by entering them into the RLIN
(Research Libraries Information Network) database and discovered that “fully 57% of the books cataloged are new to the database, and close to 20% represent unique titles in U.S. libraries.” The library building was renovated, and most “books and pamphlets that are at the heart of the understanding of German American culture” were physically restored.78

In celebration of the completed project, Frank Trommler organized another scholarly conference under the appropriate and provocative heading “The Future of German-American History,” sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania and the GSP. This conference, too, resulted in a book publication.79

This successful endeavor, however, constituted the last serious effort the GSP has made to put its library at the center of German-American studies in this country. After 1999, no one raised additional funds to make the library accessible to the general public or scholars. One reason for this is members’ failure to acknowledge a change in the library’s status. It is no longer the Volksbibliothek it once was, but now essentially houses a research collection for scholars of German-American studies. To this day, many society members think of the library as an ordinary lending library without fully appreciating the scholarly value of the collection, which has
been reflected in society decisions. In 1987, the board decided to purchase audiotapes in “music, contemporary German culture and biography” and to begin offering videotapes as well, a policy pursued into the 1990s. In some ways, the library project accelerated and finalized the shift from a Volksbibliothek to a research library, albeit one that has been closed for over three years as of this writing. The library closed its doors to all users between February 1998 and the fall of 1999, following decades of decline in the number of visitors. Since then, very few people have attempted to borrow books, and those who might have wanted to could not because the society has not employed a trained librarian since 2002. In part, this was due to a lack of funds but also board members’ unwillingness to commit resources to an aspect of the society that by its very nature cannot be self-sustainable. Some board members, unaware of the climate control precautions necessary to preserve the collection, have also shut off the sophisticated but complicated air-conditioning system in the library to save money at times.

Substantial financial support and serious dedication are needed to make the collection available to scholars. Rare book collections by their very nature generate limited readerships but are extremely costly to maintain, and they are experiencing increasing financial pressure nowadays. Even an organization as old and prominent as the College of Physicians in Philadelphia, home to the third-largest medical library in the country, has had to lay off librarians and other staff members due to a $500,000 budget deficit. Although the college is not considering selling its collection at this time, commentators fear that it will eventually do so, just as the Franklin Institute had to sell its rare books in the 1970s and 80s for financial reasons. With these organizations unable to maintain their historical treasures, the GSP library becomes even more precious but also more endangered.

Outside of its library, the society has managed to survive over the past two decades by offering German language courses, music concerts, film evenings, and other cultural and social programs. With the exception of the language program, which generates profits of perhaps $40,000 annually, most of these events merely break even. Attracting new members continues to be a problem. A group of nearly one hundred young German professionals has formed its own organization outside of the society because the GSP does not currently offer much for that demographic group. Ranging in age mostly from their twenties to their forties, this younger generation includes women and men of all backgrounds. Among them are students, teachers, physicians, academics, artists, housewives, and accountants who meet in three different locations throughout the city to socialize and to discuss current events. The society is not quite so vibrant. Assuming the GSP continues its pace of the past few
years, the organization can probably stay alive until the dedication of its volunteers wanes or until the last descendents of Germans interested in the kind of German culture produced at the society die. At least, that was the prediction of the eighty-three-year-old president and executive director of the German Society of New York, the second oldest-German organization in the U.S.83

Conclusion

In many ways, the history of the German Society of Pennsylvania is tied to the history of Philadelphia: in the colonial period, Philadelphia was the nation’s largest city; it remained preeminent as the country’s industrial center until the early twentieth century; it declined steadily from the 1940s through the 1970s; and in the past two decades, it has experienced an uneven renaissance. When the society had the chance to move to the northern suburbs where most Germans lived after World War II or to take up residence at Washington Square in the prestigious Society Hill area of Center City, leaders and members hesitated. Aside from the usual financial problems, the refugee mentality of many GSP members at the time may have contributed to their recalcitrance to move. Having lost their homes in the Old World due to the war, many seemed determined to hold on to the new German home and community they had found in the German Society at Spring Garden Street.

Considering previous generations’ willingness to change location, this sentimental attachment to the physical structure of the society is a recent phenomenon of the past five decades that has put the GSP in the unique position of being the only ethnic organization in the city to have been at the same location for nearly 120 years. On the other hand, the GSP’s decision to stay has added a substantial financial burden to the society and continues to cause concern about safety in a neighborhood that seems to defy the gentrification visible elsewhere in the city.

In addition to the challenges posed by its location and building, the German Society became entangled in Philadelphia’s redevelopment politics. In many ways it ended up as a victim of misguided and inconsistent local and federal-housing planning. Moreover, the substantial accomplishments of the building and library projects have been overshadowed by internal conflicts during the past five years. Hiring a professional staff at market costs led to personnel budgets of nearly $200,000 per year, an unsustainable expense for an organization without a real endowment and with fewer than 900 members paying $50 annual dues.84 As Sally Griffith has said about the history of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, “it is crucial to appreciate that it is essentially a voluntary association that has survived into a very different age from the one in which it began.”85
While the spirit of volunteerism seems alive and well among many GSP members, more than time, painting, and scrubbing are needed to save the organization and to give it a chance to reinvent itself.

The GSP’s public appeal will remain limited, but there is a real need for a center for German-American studies that would ideally be housed at the historic Spring Garden location. The organization can reinvent itself in a way that would honor its long tradition of assisting newly arrived German immigrants in the best possible fashion: by making its unique historical sources available to a growing number of scholars who tell the story of German speakers in American history.

Notes

1 GSP Minutes, October 9, 1967.
3 Press release, January 21, 1968, GSP box I, No. 1–8, No. 204.1.
4 GSP Minutes, October 25, 1971.
5 Despite an intensive search in local archives, I have not found a photograph of the building, which no longer stands.
6 For a description of the fire, see Sunday Dispatch, November 30, 1856, Vol. 9, No. 31, LCP.
7 The Gas Company turned into a rather bothersome tenant, however. It refused to pay the GSP for the annual taxes on the building after the society had finally achieved tax-exempt status in 1869. According to the rental agreement, the Gas Company was supposed to pay all building-related expenses, and representatives had promised to turn over tax payments to the society in the case of GSP tax exemption. When the time came, however, the Gas Company refused to pay the GSP, resulting in a lawsuit that was not settled in favor of the GSP until 1877. See Seidensticker, Geschichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft, 80–83.
8 For a detailed history of the early buildings, see Seidensticker, 70–85.
9 GSP Minutes, September 25, 1882.
10 Seidensticker, 532–3.
12 The opening of the building was reported in all major newspapers. The GSP cut out and collected various newspaper clippings (often without date and labels) in Hausbuch, uncataloged, GAC. For a scholarly analysis of the building, see Alison Leigh McDowell, “Analysis of the Historic Mechanical Systems of the Headquarters of the German Society of Pennsylvania, Located at 611 Spring Garden Street, Philadelphia, PA,” Department of Historic Preservation, The University of Pennsylvania, April 11, 1995.
13 GSP Minutes, October 16, 1941.
14 The installation of a commercial kitchen in the basement in the summer of 2005 may make the building attractive for event rentals. However, there is no commercial stove due to lack of proper ventilation, and the building does not have a sprinkler system, making renting the building for larger events problematic for insurance purposes.
15 GSP Minutes, March 31, 1919. For information on Fahrenwald, see Seidensticker, 477–8.
“Changes in Spring Garden Street,” newspaper clipping, no title, March 15, 1908, Campbell Collection, vol. 73, p. 184, HSP.

Between 1932 and 1941, Philadelphia’s overall real estate market experienced a 33 percent decline in assessed value. Tinkom, “Depression and War, 1929–1946,” 646.

This trend is evident in the fact that, by 1933, a German-owned pharmacy in Olney, a section of Philadelphia a few miles northeast of the Spring Garden area, had become part of the GSP network of free or reduced-cost medical services. GSP Annual Report 1933.

GSP Annual Report 1936.

GSP Minutes, April 17, 1947.

GSP Minutes, January 19, 1950.

GSP Minutes, October 23, 1952.

For a representative example of advertisements by German organizations, see Philadelphia Gazette Democrat, May 15, 1954.


Letter from Herman Witte to Aubrey R. Sheetz, October 23, 1954, uncataloged.

One of the success stories of the Redevelopment Authority was the Washington Square section of Society Hill, which is today among the most expensive real estate in the city.


Letter from Herman Witte to Philadelphia Art Commission, March 14, 1959, uncataloged. For the official Redevelopment Authority Plan of the area, see “East Poplar is a good place to live!” published by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia, 211 S. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19107, 1964, uncataloged.

Letter from Ludwig Honold to Herman Witte, August 22, 1967, uncataloged.


Bauman, 92.

Bauman, 107.

Bauman, 84, 86.

Bauman, 168, Table 2 and 201.

Bauman, 202.

Statement by C.R. Walther Thomas, M.A., Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania. President of the German Society of Pennsylvania and Dean of Instruction, Community College of Philadelphia, March 20, 1969.
44 A donation to the committee was discussed at a GSP board meeting. See GSP Minutes, April 28, 1969.

45 GSP Minutes, October 27, 1969, uncataloged box.

46 GSP Minutes, September 15, 1969.


48 In October 1973, beer steins worth $3,000 were stolen from the basement. A board member became a designated escort for the elderly librarian’s walk to the train station. See GSP Minutes, October 15, 1973. By 1980, President Beichl announced that during all major activities a hired guard watched over parked cars and the society contacted the local police district to actively patrol the area. Beichl newsletter, March 27, 1980. By 1990, the hourly rate of $11.50 for these guards was more than the wages earned by the librarian. Beichl newsletter, December 1990. In 1986, Mrs. Sonnenberg was robbed on her return from Provident Bank across the street from the GSP. GSP Minutes, May 19, 1986. That same year, rangers to be stationed at the newly opened Edgar Allen Poe House behind the GSP were supposed to “keep an eye on the building.” GSP Minutes, March 24, 1986.

49 Beichl newsletter, December 1990.

50 GSP Minutes, April 25, 1988.

51 Board members’ ages confirmed Thomas’s assessment. In 1969, the youngest board member was 40 and the oldest 79. The average age of the 18-member board was over 56. “List of all officers and directors for 1969/70,” uncataloged.

52 Handwritten notes by President Thomas, “Statement of Objectives for the German Society of Pennsylvania,” March 27, 1967, GSP various box #3.


54 By this time, the conversion of the basement into a Ratskeller had gone $10,000 beyond the original budget of $30,000 by 1970. GSP Minutes, September 12, 1970. In 1973, the society had to approve $12,000 for much needed renovations although some board members grumbled about taking such a large sum from the investment portfolio, which was shrinking due to the stock market crisis of the early 1970s. GSP Minutes, May 21, 1973. Within ten months, the society’s portfolio had declined by over 35 percent from $456,000 to $278,600. GSP Minutes, March 25, 1974. Membership numbers had also only improved slowly from around 300 in 1969 to 375 in 1974. GSP Minutes, January 14, 1974.

55 John Huberti’s “Basic Program Goals, 1970/1” presented to the Board of Directors, uncataloged.

56 The first citizen reception at the GSP was held on August 30, 1967. GSP Minutes, September 18, 1967. On January 13, 1968, a second one was held where nine Germans and one Austrian were among the seventy immigrants. At the subsequent board meeting, the benefits of local press coverage were discussed. GSP Minutes, January 15, 1968.

57 GSP Minutes, May 25, 1974.

58 GSP Minutes, March 22, 1982. The last citizen luncheon seems to have been held in 1989. Beichl newsletter, October 11, 1989.

59 Two German girls were looking for au-pair positions. See Beichl newsletter, June 9, 1983. By 1992, when the newsletter had taken on a more professional appearance, it had become a virtual clearinghouse for job announcements and those seeking employment. See, for example, Der Neue Pennsylvanische Staatsbote, January 1992.

60 As early as 1976, one GSP member argued “that the primary objective of the Society should be to counteract [the] lingering distrust [of Germans] by highlighting the contribution of earlier generations of Germans to the making of modern America.” GSP Minutes, April 22, 1976.

61 For one of many examples, see Beichl’s letter to the editor, Philadelphia Inquirer, November 30, 1980. Beichl also invited speakers to the GSP who could lecture on the resistance move-
ment. For an announcement of one such talk, see GSP Minutes, December 6, 1981. Dr. Carl Schweitzer, “The German Resistance to Hitler,” December 6, 1981.

The city had begun its preparations for the bicentennial in 1964 with various planning groups that seem to have spent a lot of money on nothing. Although important historic sites such as the Independence Mall were coincidentally completed in time with federal funds, the city’s strategy of emphasizing entertainment backfired when only half of the hoped-for 20 million tourists came and most of the public exhibits, such as a video about the city, produced at a cost of $2 million, attracted few viewers. The only aspect most Philadelphians remembered decades later was the fire hydrants painted red, white, and blue. The GSP was initially inspired by the city’s effort to plan early for the 1976 event and even established a “200 fund” to save money for the celebration but in the end was disillusioned by Philadelphia’s inability to organize a dignified result.

62 Wolf, 730–2.


65 For the $1,000 support, see GSP Minutes, May 24, 1982. For the list of sponsors, see “German-American Tricentennial, 1683–1983 Banquet Program, October 6, 1983.” Courtesy of Frank Trommler’s records.

66 GSP Minutes, December 12, 1982.

67 Theo Sommer, “Falsches Pathos beim Familienfest,” Die Zeit, October 21. Sommer had criticized German officials, in particular, for failing to mention the current tensions between the U.S. and Germany arising from Reagan’s nuclear weapons proliferation program within the context of the Cold War. German officials did not even address the fact that 5,000 peace demonstrators, both American and German, were staging a candle-light vigil on the steps of Philadelphia’s art museum as the politicians held their banquet inside.

68 GSP Minutes, November 26, 1984.

69 GSP Minutes, June 27, 1985.

70 GSP Minutes, September 21, 1987.

71 GSP Minutes, January 27, 1988, and February 22, 1988. Lang’s relationship with the male-dominated GSP board was difficult, at best.

72 Shore was later Director of Libraries and Professor of History at Bryn Mawr College.

73 GSP Minutes, December 21, 1987. I am grateful to Frank Trommler for providing me with his personal notes and documents pertaining to the library and building project.

74 GSP Minutes, November 27, 1989.

75 A major German newspaper reported that the society’s library had become “a victim of unity.” Frankfurter Rundschau, December 12, 1990.

76 Beichl’s distrust of the University of Pennsylvania and perhaps academics in general is apparent in Frank Trommler’s notes taken about his conversations with Beichl. The issue was also raised repeatedly at GSP board meetings. See Trommler’s handwritten notes about conversation with George Beichl, May 7, 1992.

77 The Freitag administration became controversial. Struggles between member volunteer workers and paid professionals over who was in charge and who was accountable to whom raised tensions all around and often resulted in ugly outbursts. Freitag’s successor, James Mundy, library director at the Union League of Philadelphia, inherited the tension-riddled climate, making it impossible for him to unite members.


Accurate membership numbers are impossible to ascertain since the society counts everyone admitted to membership instead of only those who are current on their dues payments. At times, merely 50 percent of those who were listed as members had actually paid their dues.