

NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT

PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with a Board of Revision of Taxes address)

Street address: **725 Chestnut Street**

Postal code: **19106** Councilmanic District: **1st**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Philadelphia Blue Print Company**

Common Name: **Philadelphia Blue Print Company**

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

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

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: **Office and retail**

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

6. DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

7. SIGNIFICANCE

SEE ATTACHED

Period of Significance (from year to year): **c.1855-1935**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **c.1855; 1903; 1935**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Stephen Button (attributed); Chester H. Kirk; Karl F. Otto**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan:

Original owner:

Other significant persons:

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- ☒ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- ☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☒ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- ☐ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- ☐ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☐ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- ☒ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- ☐ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- ☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- ☒ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

SEE ATTACHED

9. NOMINATOR

Name with Title: **Benjamin Leech, Director of Advocacy**

Email: **ben@preservationalliance.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**

Date: **September 12, 2014**

Street Address: **1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1300**

Telephone: **215-546-1146 x5**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, PA 19103**

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: _____

☐ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: _____

Date of Notice Issuance: _____

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Postal Code: _____

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

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

3/16/07

5. Boundary Description

From a point along the north curb line of Chestnut Street approximately 126 feet east of South 8th Street, the boundary of the property runs north 178 feet to Ranstead Street, thence east approximately 25 feet, thence south 178 feet, thence west approximately 25 feet to the beginning point.



6. Description

The former Philadelphia Blueprint Company building stands on the north side of Chestnut Street between 7th and 8th Streets in Center City Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is a contributing structure within the East Center City Commercial Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. The two-story, flat-roofed commercial structure occupies the full width and depth of a 25' by 178' lot. Its primary south façade fronts on Chestnut Street, with a secondary north façade on Ranstead Street. Its east and west elevations are party walls shared with adjacent structures.

The Chestnut Street façade is three bays wide and clad in limestone and buff terra cotta [Fig. 1]. A storefront spans the full width of the ground floor, framed by pilasters at each corner of the façade. These two pilasters each feature a base of rusticated blocks, a molded capitol, and a voluted bracket carrying a projecting cornice [Fig. 2]. A prominent blue glass storefront transom spans between these pilasters. Twenty-eight individual panes of glass are set in copper channels, forming two rows of fourteen panes. Etched into these panes are single white letterforms spelling out “Philadelphia Blue Print Co” in a delicate serif font [Fig. 3]. Likely designed to emulate the white-on-blue medium of architectural blueprints, this unique historic signage is among the most character-defining features of the building. The storefront area below the historic transom is a contemporary glass and metal assembly featuring a pair of entryways flanking a central glazed storefront.

The projecting cornice spans the full width of the building above the storefront. The cornice originally featured block modillions, but these are no longer extant.¹ The cornice supports a railing of flat iron scrollwork, behind which sit three segmental arch window bays with classically-detailed keystones [Fig. 4]. The central bay is wider than the flanking pair and features a pair of arched casement windows. Each side window is a one-over-one sash with arched upper lights. All windows are modern replacements but match historic configurations, including curved horizontal muntins in the central casements. The central bay is further emphasized by a classical cartouche keystone and

¹ A photograph taken in 1966 shows many of these modillions already missing, and the remainder were removed most likely due to structural failure [Fig. 10]. Exposed metal brackets and vestiges of molding returns remain at the cornice soffit, however.

an elaborate bracketed hood featuring a decorated open frieze capped by a pair of flame finials. A flat cornice runs the width of the building in line with the hood, above which a short blank parapet terminates the building.

The rear Ranstead Street elevation is of utilitarian appearance and has been heavily altered [Fig. 5]. Two utilitarian doorways serve this elevation: a single leaf to the east and a double leaf to the west. Cast iron columns and lintel span the ground floor, in plane with assorted later infill materials. The columns feature cast ornamental details [Fig. 6]. The second floor features an asymmetrical arrangement of three masonry openings. A wide shallow-arched window to the east has been altered to accommodate a pair of vinyl casement windows. A pair of narrower openings sit to the west, one arched and one with a flat lintel. The flat-lintelled opening is fitted with a modern one-over-one vinyl sash, while the arched opening has been infilled. A projecting beltcourse runs the width of the building at sill height. Above the windows, terra cotta coping tiles cap an otherwise flat parapet.

The current form of the building, credited to architect Karl. F. Otto, dates to 1934-35, when four upper floors of a six-story building on this site were removed.² The existing Chestnut Street façade is actually the surviving base of this taller building, revealed in historic photographs to be an eclectic French Renaissance-inspired composition of brick and terra cotta with an elaborate mansard roof [Fig. 7]. Stacked quoins delineated the outer bays of a three-bay composition with exaggerated Edwardian flat-arched lintels set in a field of Flemish-bond brick. Various window rails, hoods, and brackets repeated the design motifs found on the lower floors. This design, by architect Chester H. Kirk, dates from 1903, having replaced significant portions of a still-earlier building on the same site: the central parcel of a tripartite c.1855 commercial block at 723-727 Chestnut Street, of which the 723 Chestnut portion still remains.³ The 1903 design followed the property's purchase by Mahlon W. Newton, proprietor of the

² *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, vol. 50, no. 4, p. 29 (1/23/1935)

³ While the 1903 design (and by extension, its surviving portions manifest in the current building) retained some portion of the c.1855 structure, it should be noted that floor levels of the 1903 design did not align with its formerly matching neighbors, indicating extensive demolition and reconstruction (as opposed to superficial recladding). However, the existing rear elevation, though heavily altered, matches in detail with the adjacent 723 Chestnut and appears to correspond closely with the original structure as described in an 1866 Philadelphia Contributionship fire insurance description of the property.

adjacent Green's Hotel at the corner of Chestnut and 8th Street.⁴ Whether the building was designed as an expansion of Green's Hotel or operated as a distinct commercial parcel is unknown: deeds and building permits issued in 1903 list Newton and Green's Hotel as owners, but the 1922 Bromley Atlas does not denote the property as part of the adjacent hotel.⁵ The distinctive Philadelphia Blueprint Company transom sign is almost certainly original to the subsequent 1934-35 remodeling, as the company first appears at this address in the August 1936 Philadelphia City Directory.

⁴ Warwick, Charles F. *Warwick's Keystone Commonwealth*. Philadelphia: Ella K. Warwick, 1913, p. 337.

⁵ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 17 (1/14/1903); Deed Book WSV 126 p. 278 (1/7/1903); *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia (Central)*. Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley and Co, 1922, Plate 4.

7. Significance

The former Philadelphia Blueprint Company building at 725 Chestnut Street meets the following Criteria for Designation as set forth in Section 14-2007(5) of the Philadelphia Code. The building:

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City;
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif;
- and*
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.

Criteria A: Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City,
and

Criteria J: Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community.

The former Philadelphia Blueprint Company building has significant character, interest, and value as a commercial structure representative of the development of Chestnut Street, one of the city's principle commercial corridors. The dynamic architectural transformation this corridor experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is uniquely reflected in the surviving fabric of the building, which preserves elements of at least three major building campaigns from c.1855, 1903, and 1935. The building's history, along with its physical fabric, is interwoven with that of adjacent properties to the east and west, creating an architectural palimpsest that preserves tangible pieces of otherwise vanished buildings and businesses on this block of Chestnut Street.

The oldest surviving extant fabric dates to c.1855, when a three-parcel commercial block was constructed at 723-727 Chestnut Street, replacing a large Federal-style residence on the site built in 1792.⁶ Two of these parcels, 725 and 727, were owned

⁶ Winston Weisman, "Philadelphia Functionalism and Sullivan," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 20, n. 1 (March 1961), p. 14; Deed Book JH 62, p. 49 (12/24/1852); Caspar Souder, *History of Chestnut Street*, vol. 4, p. 132.

by successful merchant and philanthropist Isaiah Williamson, and the new buildings were designed in an emerging commercial style that reflected the growing density and changing use of the street. The design, attributed to Stephen Decatur Button (1813-1897) by architectural historian Winston Weisman, featured a unified Chestnut Street elevation featuring cast-iron ground-floor storefronts, expansive upper-floor windows, and a pronounced verticality in the design of the four-story granite façade. Tenants of these new buildings were all in the textile and cobbling trades: 725 Chestnut, the central parcel, was first occupied by the straw good and bonnet company Lincoln, Wood & Nichols. To the west stood D.R. King & Company boot and shoe manufactory, and to the east stood the offices and showroom of Horstmann's dress trimmings and military goods manufactory [Fig. 8]. These three buildings were typical of a functional trend in mid-nineteenth-century commercial architecture, with demands for increased floor area, high ceilings, abundant natural light, and prominent storefront displays driving the design of new commercial buildings to replace the residential, Colonial and Federal structures that formerly lined Chestnut Street. While the front portion of 725 Chestnut was demolished in 1903, its rear elevation survives in altered form, sharing distinctive cast iron ornament with the adjacent rear of 723 Chestnut [Fig. 6].

In 1903, 725 Chestnut was purchased by Mahlon W. Newton from the Merchants Fund Society, who had received the building as a gift from Williamson in 1874.⁷ Newton was the proprietor of Green's Hotel, a popular lodging house on the northeast corner of Eighth and Chestnut Streets. The hotel had previously expanded to include the adjacent 727 Chestnut Street, part of Button's c.1855 commercial block, where a new parapet was added to help unify the structure with the architecturally eclectic hotel design next door [Figs. 7, 9]. A more radical transformation was undertaken at 725 Chestnut: a new six-story French Renaissance façade entirely replaced Button's design. This new composition was the work of Chester Hughes Kirk, a Philadelphia architect who studied at the University of Pennsylvania and maintained a modest commercial and residential practice.⁸ His design was somewhat anachronistic in the context of its neighbors and reflected changing tastes in architectural fashion. Inserting six floors into the

⁷ Deed Book WSV 126, p. 278 (1/7/1903); Deed Book FTW 95, p. 522 (1/12/1874).

⁸ Sandra L. Tatman, "Kirk, Chester Hughes (b. 1869)," *American Architects and Buildings Database*, <http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/> Accessed 6/24/2010.

approximate height of its four-story neighbors, the new design was more residential in character, with smaller window openings, eclectic historicist details, decorative iron balcony railings, and a picturesque mansard roof with elaborate dormer pediments [Fig. 7]. Though of a vastly smaller scale, the building shared stylistic similarities with such contemporary grand hotel designs as the Saint James (Horace Trumbauer, 1900) and the Bellevue Stratford (G.W. & W.D. Hewitt, 1904), which were rapidly displacing smaller Center City hotels at the turn of the twentieth century.

After a period of general decline paralleling the economic strains of the Great Depression, the property was acquired for a second time by the Merchants Fund in 1933 and transferred to the Fidelity Philadelphia Trust Company. In 1934-35, the top four stories were demolished and the ground-floor storefront reconfigured by architect Karl F. Otto, preserving intact the stone and terra cotta base of the 1903 building.⁹ The motivating factors behind this radical alteration are unknown, but no doubt reflect the declining value of upper-floor commercial space as both mercantile and hotel/residential activities gravitated away from this segment of Chestnut Street. The Philadelphia Blueprint Company, which relocated here from the northwest corner of 6th and Chestnut Streets in 1936, occupied the building for the next seventy years through various ownership iterations—a period of remarkable stability given the site’s otherwise turbulent evolution. In this context, the building’s current form is significant not only for its piecemeal retention of earlier building fabric, but also for its integrity as the site’s most commercially stable and longest-surviving incarnation along one of the city’s most dynamic commercial corridors.

Criteria C: Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style.

The Philadelphia Blueprint Company building is a product of multiple building campaigns executed in multiple eras and in multiple architectural styles. It is essentially a “cropped” 1903 French Renaissance-inspired beaux arts design with 1930s commercial signage and remnants of an 1853 rear elevation. The building stands today as it has stood

⁹ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, vol. 50, no. 4, p. 29 (1/23/1935)

for the past seventy-five years, maintaining the visual integrity of a unified design. This is in part a reflection of the distinctly stratified base-shaft-capital delineation of the original 1903 structure, which employed different materials and ornamental details in each section. This provided a visual rationale for preserving the lower floors unaltered when the remainder of the building was deemed obsolete, and also highlights the extended period of popularity that Beaux-Arts ornament enjoyed in twentieth-century commercial architecture.

The building's details are executed largely in terra cotta, a material used commonly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to imitate the color and texture of cut stone. At least four dozen major terra cotta manufacturers existed in America at the turn of the century, and all had extensive catalogs of stock designs running the gamut of architectural styles. In Philadelphia, the Conkling Armstrong Terra Cotta Company and the O. W. Ketchum Terra Cotta Works were major local manufacturers and suppliers, though many other companies served the Philadelphia market as well. The ornament used in the design of the Philadelphia Blueprint building is highly characteristic of the material's role in turn-of-the-century commercial architecture. Most likely assembled from stock designs, the various ornamental elements were combined with cut stone to produce an economical but still ornate Beaux-Arts façade. Though terra cotta could be custom designed and glazed any number of vibrant colors, the vast majority of terra cotta installations of this era, especially in Philadelphia, were done in historicist styles and in pursuit of a traditional masonry appearance. As was also typical for French Renaissance-inspired Beaux-Arts designs, wrought iron balcony rails added to the rich ornamental detail of the façade.

While the majority of the existing Chestnut Street façade dates to 1903, the building's most character-defining feature is the elegant glass transom sign added when the building was reconfigured in 1930s. The Philadelphia Blueprint Company sign is a remarkably intact example of architecturally-integrated commercial signage executed in the rare medium of lettered stained glass. Chestnut Street is a living museum of architectural signage, with myriad examples of forms and materials advertising both past and present business establishments. But given the ephemeral nature of most commercial signage, few examples have survived from the era of the Philadelphia Blueprint transom,

making it a unique feature of the streetscape. Its delicate white lettering on semi-opaque Prussian blue glass evokes the medium of architectural blueprints. Illuminated from behind by the ambient light of the storefront space, the sign was designed to attract further attention by “glowing” after nightfall—a unique variation on the contemporary developments of incandescent bulb signs and early neon technology. Though the transom was concealed behind a neon box sign for a period in the mid-twentieth century [Fig. 10], its survival is attributable in part to both its fine craftsmanship and the building’s continuity of use for seventy years.

Criterion G: Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif.

The dynamic architectural transformation Chestnut Street experienced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is uniquely reflected in the surviving fabric of its 700 block, which today presents an architectural palimpsest reflecting two centuries of economic and cultural transformation. This concentration of relatively intact, small-scale commercial structures dating from the middle nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries is virtually unmatched by any other extant block of Chestnut Street, particularly east of Broad Street. Though the 700 block is specifically identified as noteworthy in the National Register-listed East Center City Commercial Historic District, the area is not included in any local historic district and currently contains only one property individually listed on the Philadelphia Register: Paul Cret’s 1929 Integrity Trust Company at 717 Chestnut Street.

In addition to 725 Chestnut Street, several other properties on the 700 block merit consideration for Philadelphia Register designation, including (but not limited to) the North American Building (701 Chestnut), Quaker City National Bank (721 Chestnut), and the W. H. Horstmann Company Building (723 Chestnut) on the north side of the street, and the Quaker City National Bank (706 Chestnut), Henry C. Lea Building (722 Chestnut) and Hausmann Company Building (726 Chestnut) on the south side of the street. Several additional buildings would be considered contributing to a potential historic or conservation district. In this context, 725 Chestnut Street is part of a

distinctive area whose unique architectural character is the product of a rare surviving concentration of similarly-scaled but architecturally diverse commercial structures representing two centuries of development.

8. Major Bibliographic References

Atlas of the City of Philadelphia (Central). Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley and Co, 1922, Plate 4.

Baxter's Panoramic Business Directory, 1859.

Deed Book FTW 95, p. 522, January 12, 1874.

Deed Book WSV 126 p. 278, January 7, 1903.

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Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 17, January 14, 1903.

Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide, vol. 50, no. 4, p. 29, January 23, 1935.

Souder, Caspar. *History of Chestnut Street, Philadelphia (scrapbook and sketches)* Vol. 4. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Tatman, Sandra L. "Kirk, Chester Hughes (b. 1869)," *American Architects and Buildings Database*, http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/25022

Warwick, Charles F. *Warwick's Keystone Commonwealth*. Philadelphia: Ella K. Warwick, 1913.

Weisman, Winston. "Philadelphia Functionalism and Sullivan," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 20, n. 1, March 1961.

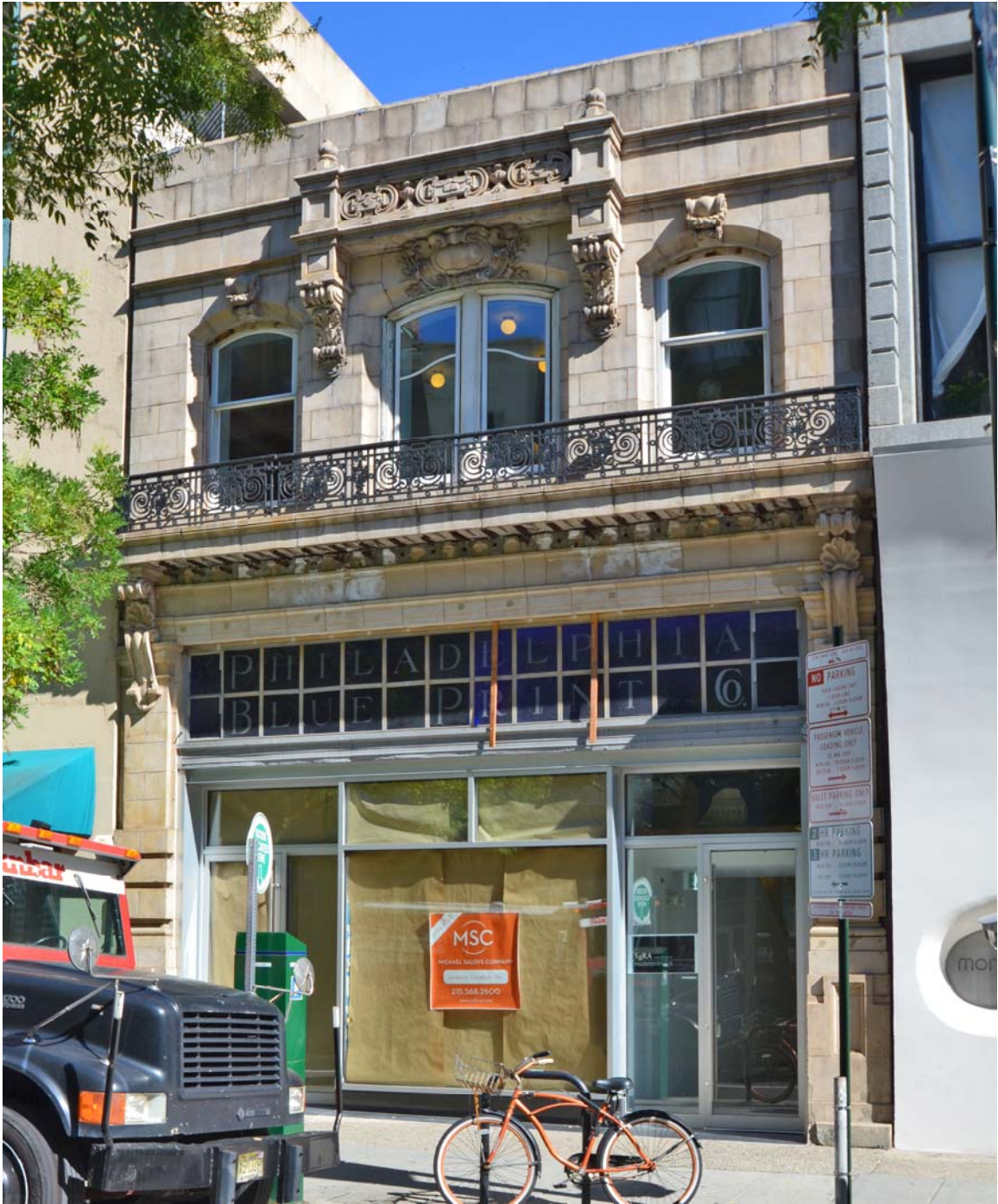


Figure 1: South elevation.



Figure 2: Terra cotta bracket detail



Figure 3: Transom signage detail

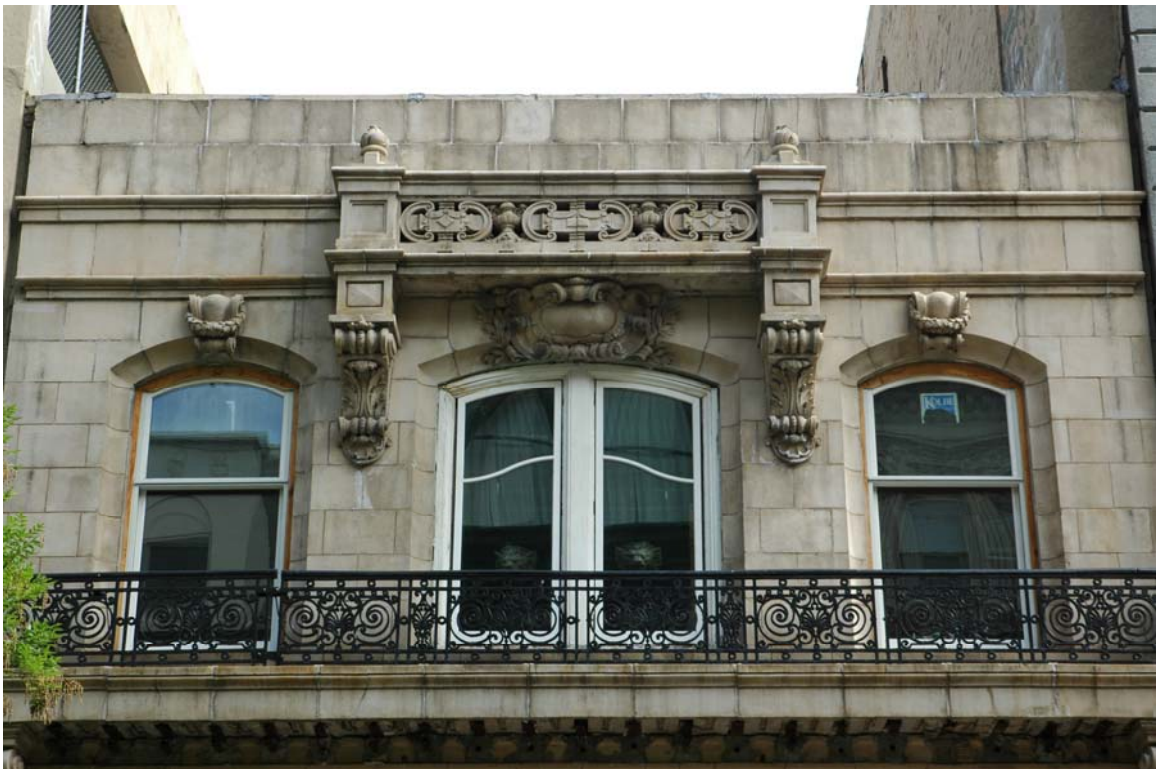


Figure 4: Second story detail.



Figure 5: North elevation.



Figure 6: Cast iron column ornament, north elevation.

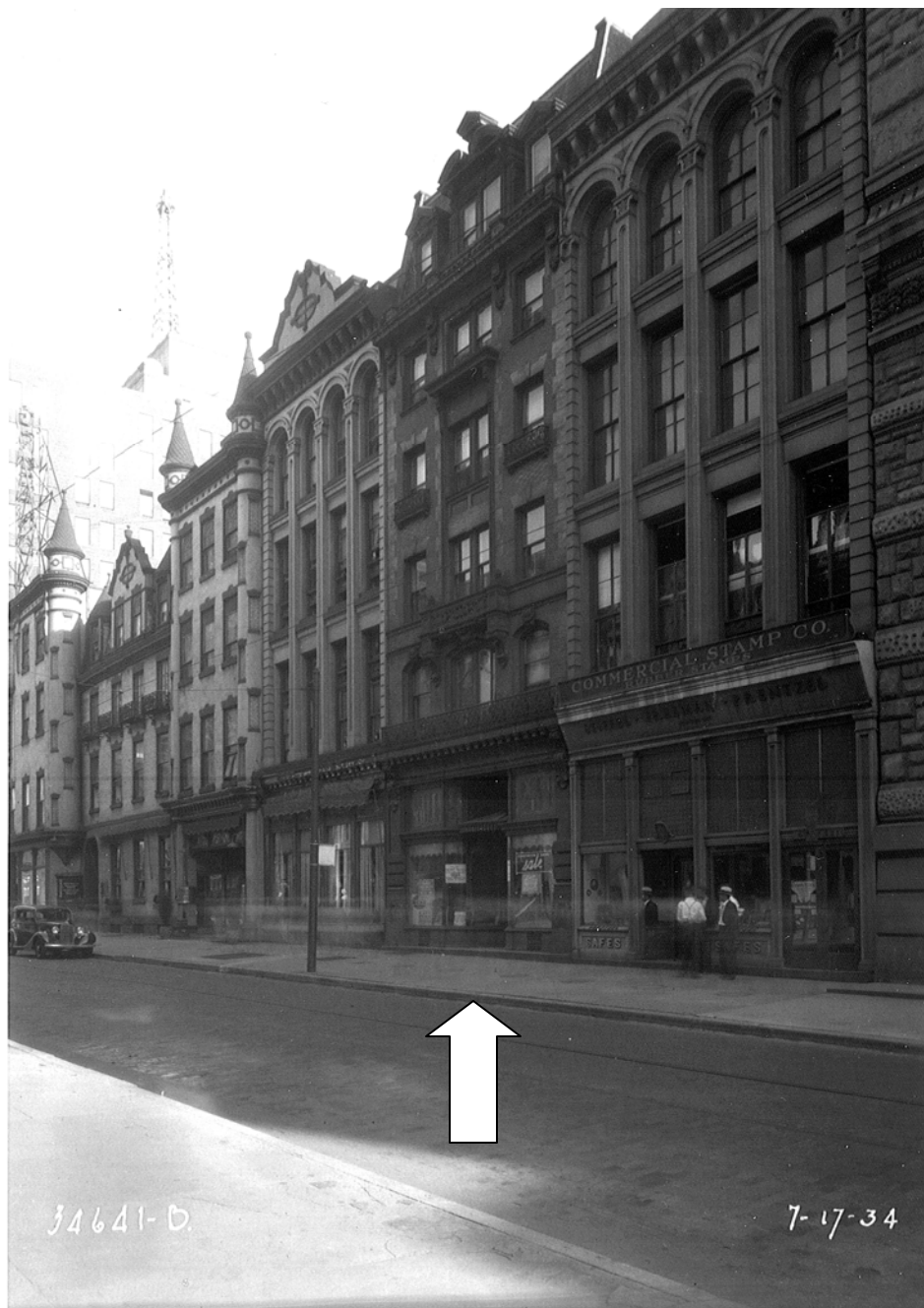


Figure 7: 725 Chestnut, 1934. Philadelphia City Archives.

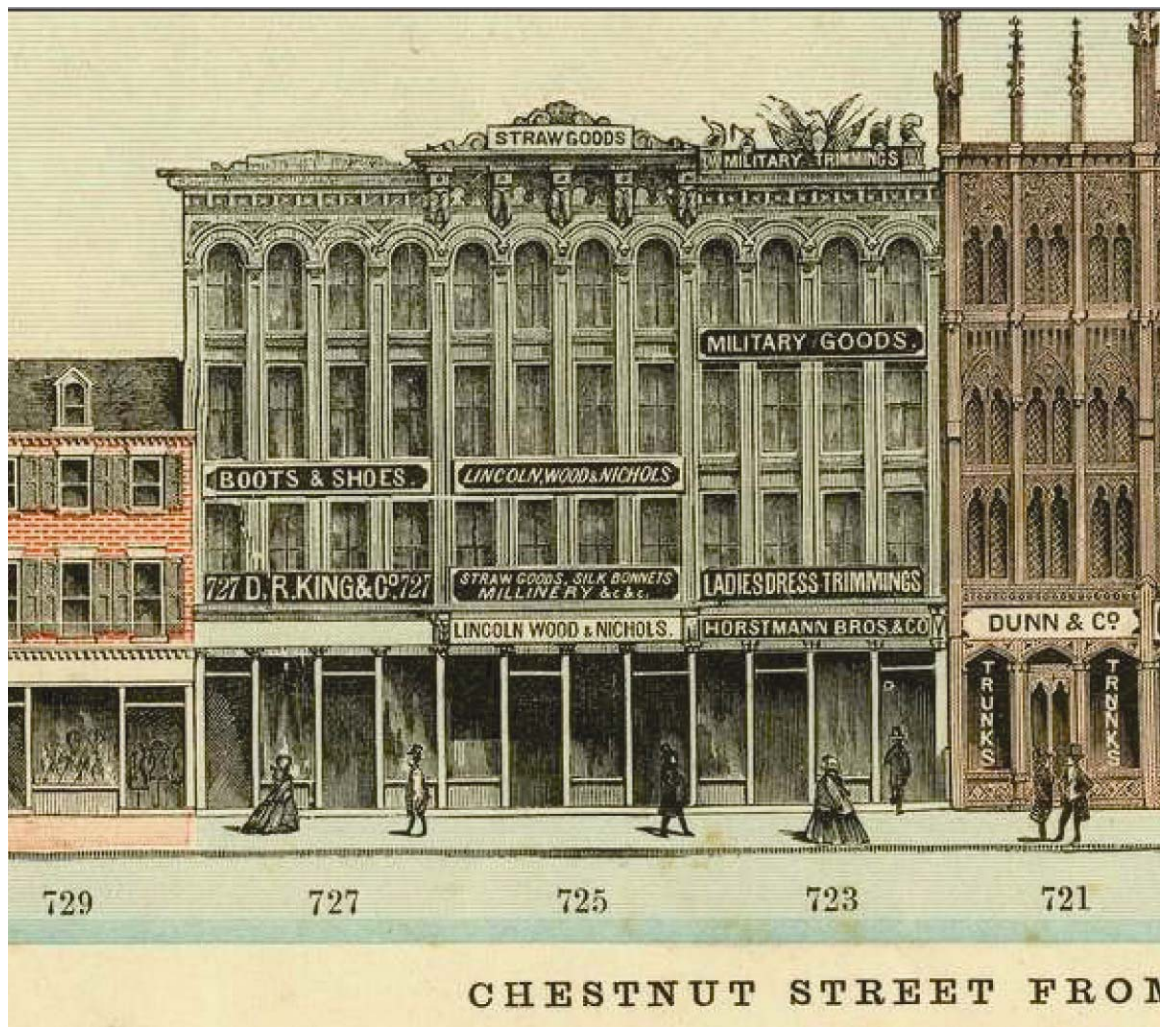


Figure 8: Baxter's Panoramic Business Directory, 1859. Athenaeum of Philadelphia.



Figure 9: Green's Hotel, 727-733 Chestnut, c.1920.
 Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Company
 Photograph Collection.
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/det1994002023/PP/>





Figure 10: 725 Chestnut, c.1966. City of Philadelphia Records Department.