

Church of the Crucifixion January Property of the Month

Throughout the history of Philadelphia, Bella Vista has seen significant demographic and socioeconomic changes. In the mid-19th century, the neighborhood was ripe with racial discord, poverty, and violence. Today, people are planting their roots here due to its familial and friendly atmosphere. One of the many factors that has contributed to this is the ubiquitous, vibrant culture and history of the neighborhood. For evidence of this, one need to look no further than the buildings, particularly the churches, in the area.

The Church of the Crucifixion and Parish House on 807-811 Bainbridge Street has been a constant structure throughout the various cultural shifts seen in Bella Vista over the years. Constructed in 1884, the building was a shelter and refuge for some of the city's poorest black residents, who often had to endure dangerous conditions on their walk to Church, including physical and verbal threats. According to Philadelphia Tribune articles from 1912, many men from the congregation were attacked by white men on S. 8th Street, and the nearby volunteer fire department was also outwardly oppressive of the black male congregants, making for an unsafe commute to church each week. Despite this, through the work of its renowned Pastor, Henry L Phillips (below), the Church was a leader of its time in offering social programs, including: creation of the first gymnasium in Philadelphia for blacks, as well as, the expansion and growth of various initiatives for the needy through its Home for the Homeless program. Phillips was posthumously recognized for these achievements in 1992 with a state historical marker on the location.



W.E.B Du Bois, who was a member of the Church, claimed in his book *The Philadelphia Negro* that no other church in the city was doing as much for the social betterment of Philadelphia Blacks as the Church of the Crucifixion. Du Bois continued:

The oldest of the churches is St. Thomas. Next comes the Church of the Crucifixion, over fifty years old and perhaps the most effective church organization in the city for benevolent and rescue work. It has been built up virtually by one Negro, a man of sincerity and culture, and of peculiar energy. This church carries on regular church work at Bainbridge and Eighth and at two branch missions; it helps in the Fresh Air Fund, has an ice mission, a vacation school of thirty-five children, and a parish visitor. It makes an especial feature of good music with its vested choir. One or two courses of University Extension lectures are held here each year, and there is a large beneficial and insurance society in active operation, and a Home for the Homeless on Lombard street. This church especially reaches after a class of neglected poor whom the other colored churches shun or forget and for whom there is little fellowship in white churches.

Nestled amongst houses and shops just south of South Street, the building itself was designed by prolific Philadelphia church architect Isaac Purcell, is of small gothic style, and was once dominated by a large, stained-glass window. The entrances contain large, pointed arches and a five-foot high carved granite base surrounds the building. The Church once housed of the more popular choirs in the city (below). Marian Anderson, one of the most celebrated contraltos in American history, was a member of this choir and often required a chair to stand on in order to see the conductor.



Today, despite its vacancy, the building continues to act as a harbor of service. The RISE program, a ministry of Saint Marks Church, will often use the building to bake bread and food to provide to those who are in need. It is for these reasons that the Bella Vista Neighbors Association and Preservation Committee is highlighting this location. A building that has stood in our city for over a century as a crucible of service to some of its most impoverished people, is worthy of recognition and preservation.