Historic Structures Report

on

421 Locust Street

Independence National Historical Park

Prepared by

Staff

Independence National Historical Park

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

July 1960
Region Five  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pa.  
August 1, 1960

Memorandum

To: Superintendent, Independence  
   Acting  
From: Regional Director  
Subject: Historic Structures Report, Part 2, 421 Locust Street  
   Independence  

The subject report has been reviewed by this office and is recommended for approval.

(Sgd.) George A. Palmer  
Acting Regional Director

In duplicate

Copy to: Director  
   Chief, EODC

MHNelligan/1h

General  
Daily  
Area  
Programs
Memorandum

To: Regional Director, Region Five

From: Acting Chief Architect

Subject: Historic Structures Report, Part I, 421 Locust Street, Independence

The Historic Structures Report, Part I, 421 Locust Street, Independence National Historical Park has been reviewed by the interested Divisions in the Washington Office and is recommended for approval.

Robert E. Smith
Acting Chief Architect

Copy to: Chief, EODC (2)
Supt., Independence
INTERPRETATION

I differ with the proposal to use this house, after restoration, as a NPS residence. In this little house we have a priceless opportunity to portray the 18th century living conditions of the small artisans, shopkeepers and laborers who made up the bulk of Philadelphia's citizenry. Furnished accurately as a period piece, with study, prudence and frugality demonstrated in the décor, the 421 house would furnish what is badly needed at INHP: a contact with the life and times of the everyday citizens of the Revolution. As an NPS residence this house will be a dead opportunity (and an inconvenience to an employee) NPS - restore the home of FRANCE ST! - J.C.

OPERATIONS

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Agree with schematic restoration and use as quartermaster's adjacent. Additional systematic restoration required. Their estimate is OK. NR.
July 14, 1960

Memorandum

To: Director

From: Acting Regional Director

Subject: Historic Structures Report, Part I, 421 Locust Street, Independence NHP

In accordance with the procedure outlined in FO-11-56, attached for your review and comment is the subject report. A copy of the report is also being forwarded to EODC for review and comment.

All offices should submit their comments by July 25, 1960.

(Sgd.) Benjamin F. Gibson
Acting Regional Director

In duplicate

Attachments

Copy to: Chief, EODC, w/report

Supt., Independence

C Passarelli

General

Daily

Area

Programs
Memorandum

To: Regional Director, Region V
From: Superintendent, Independence
Subject: Historic Structures Report, 421 Locust Street

Enclosed in quadruplicate for your review and distribution is the Historic Structures Report on the building at 421 Locust Street.

M. O. Anderson
Superintendent

Enclosures (4)
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CHAPTER I

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Prepared by Superintendent M. O. Anderson
NAME AND NUMBER OF BUILDING

421 Locust Street, Building No. 19, is situated on the north side of Locust Street between Fourth and Fifth Streets, in Area "B" of the Park.
PROPOSED USE OF STRUCTURE
AND JUSTIFICATION

It is proposed that the exterior of this structure be restored
to serve as a needed feature in the landscape design of the Park and
that its interior be converted for employee housing. This structure,
along with the other five on Locust Street, has no significant associa-
tion with important figures or events but is typical of Philadelphia
dwellings of the historic period. The retention of all six, for incor-
poration in the overall design of this section of the Park, will help
recall the eighteenth century atmosphere.

Justification for this proposed use is contained in the approved
Mission 66 Prospectus for the Park. Only a limited number of key protec-
tive, maintenance, interpretive and administrative personnel will be
provided with housing in this and the other five structures.
PROVISION FOR OPERATING HOUSE

As residence for Park personnel, the building would be leased and rent charged.
Preliminary Estimate of Cost
for Rehabilitating the Structure
and Grounds

$26,500.
CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL DATA

Prepared by Historian Paul G. Sifton
STRUCTURAL EVIDENCE FROM
DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

The house at 421 Locust Street is one of the four aged build-
ings, grouped in pairs, still remaining on the north side of the block
between Fourth and Fifth Streets after the extensive demolition of
recent years. All four are of a type; they are all brick Philadelphia
row-houses, unimposing and unexceptional. No two are of the same
dimensions and design. Of the four, only No. 421, erected in 1786, was
built prior to 1800.

The house at 421 Locust Street has a short and boxy appearance
(see Illustration No. 1). It is two and a half stories high, with a
frontage of but 16 feet, 6-3/4 inches. This measurement, the presence
of a winding staircase from cellar to attic as mentioned in the 1820
insurance survey, and the dimensions of the attic (18' 13-1/2" by 25' 6")
provide us with three of the few facts which connect the existing build-
ing with the slender documentary evidence of the past. So far as is
known, only a single insurance survey has ever been made of the premises.
This one was recorded by the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insur-
ance of Houses from Loss by Fire on "10th Mo. 31st," 1820, and it depicts
the building in the following terms:

I have surveyed a House belonging to Thomas Truxtun Situate
on the North Side of Prune Street between Fourth & Fifth
Streets No. 23 ---16 feet front 25 deep two Stories high--
9 in. walls - lower story divided in two rooms & short pas-
sage - the 2nd story in two rooms -floors of corn Yellow
pine, wide boards plain base & Subbase, Single architraves,
& moldings, two plain mantels - winding stairs from the
cellar to the garret, all the glass 8 by 10 inches outside
shutters to the window - plain ave front & back wooden gutters & trunks -One plain dormer window & trap door in the roof, which 2/3rd worn - Garrett not plastered, painting old.

10th Mo. 31st 1820       John C. Evans

NB There is a wooden building back &
       a door of communication with it

No Ash hole

There is little doubt that the building described in the survey [old number 21, not the "23" mentioned in the survey] is the one which has survived, in a somewhat altered form, to the present. The property records, discussed in the next section, show conclusively that no building was on the lot before 1706. On April 20, 1704, Thomas Shippen made a deed with Alexander Rodgers, laborer, which contained the proviso that Rodgers would "erect and build on said lot within 2 years from the date hereof a good Tenable dwelling house." This requirement was fulfilled some time before March 22, 1706. The property records show no replacement building since then. Structural evidence would help to establish the period of construction.

In the years since the 1820 insurance survey, several changes have been effected. The frame kitchen was replaced by a brick-walled room to the rear of the two front rooms on the first floor. The second floor was altered from a two room plan to the present one room, one bathroom, and one hallway plan. The board novel staircase appears to be the one described in the 1820 survey as "from the cellar to the garret." The garret is substantially the same today as in 1820, except for the additions
of a rear dormer and a side window, and removal of the trap door in the roof. The absence of more recent insurance surveys have made it impossible to show by comparison of earlier and later records more precisely what alterations were made during this interval.
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Ownership of Property

The land on which the house at 421 Locust Street is located for more than a century belonged to William Shippen, the elder, or his heirs. It was originally part of the lot bounded by Walnut and Spruce, Fourth and Fifth streets which in 1744 was granted to Edward, Joseph and William Shippen by Thomas and Richard Penn and which the following years the brothers divided among themselves. William Shippen received the section north of what is now Locust Street. On April 20, 1754, he deeded a lot 32 feet in breadth and 70 feet in depth, consisting of the ground at present-day 421-423 Locust Street, to one Alexander Rodgers, a laborer, in return for payment of an annual rent of $42-2/3. On the eastern side of this lot Rodgers some time before March 22, 1766, erected a dwelling. Within a year one Jeremiah Collins had built and occupied a house on the adjoining lot to the west. Rodgers remained at 421 Locust Street until some time in 1792, when the property was sold at a sheriff’s sale to Isaac Bonsall, conveyancer.

Tenants of 421 Locust Street

After the builder Rodgers’ property was sold to Isaac Bonsall in 1792, various tenants occupied the house at 421 Locust Street. William Staylor owned and/or rented the house and lot from 1796 to 1804; John McCalla and Ann Edwards were tenants in 1809; John Lee (or Lee) 1808-1811; John and Thomas Carter in 1818-1819; Edward King in 1820; and William King in 1824.
Ownership of Property Since 1798

After Isaac Bonnell purchased the house and lot at 421 Locust on April 5, 1792, he sold the property to William Steyler, porter, on June 1, 1792. Steyler sold the house and lot back to a member of the Shippen family, William, the Elder, on June 27, 1799. In a partition of Shippen's property on July 31, 1802, the 421 Locust property was given to Minister Samuel Blair and his wife, Susannah. However, on the same day, the Blairs deeded all rights to the house and lot to William Shippen. In the 1803 will of William Shippen, the property was deeded to his grandson, Thomas Lee Shippen. This property was sold, as part of the William Shippen estate, on November 14, 1818, to Peter Thomson. On November 16, 1818, Thomson in turn sold the house and lot to naval hero Captain Thomas Truxtun. For two years (1821 and 1822) during his period of ownership, the directories list no occupant at 421 Locust Street. As Truxtun's residence during these closing years of his life have not been ascertained, it is possible he was living in the premises. After Truxtun's death in 1822 the property continued in the family until 1865. Since that time no one of importance owned the property before the Federal government purchased it in 1951.
EVALUATION OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

Considered apart from its setting, 421 Locust Street has a limited historical interest. The house was built in the "historic period" (1774-1800) and it was, for a time, owned and perhaps occupied by naval hero Captain Thomas Truxtun. The house at 421 Locust Street was one of a number of "income" properties owned by the members of the prominent Shippen family. It was located on a street of unpretentious residences and boarding houses bearing the humble name, Prune Street. Most of the inhabitants were tenants and were among the transitory population, seldom occupying a house for longer than two or three years. Over the span of a generation nearly a score of occupations were represented on Prune Street. It was a neighborhood of sugar refiners, joiners, coopers, brushmakers, shoemakers, tailors, grocers, coachmen, brass founders, carters, porters, wood sawyers, and laborers. It was one of the centers of the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1797.

With the ownership of 421 Locust Street, 1818-1825, by Captain Thomas Truxtun and his family, the building achieves some retrospective historical interest. Captain Thomas Truxtun brought in the largest privateering prizes of the American Revolution; took the first Philadelphia ship, the Canton, to China in 1786; wrote important early works on naval warfare; was the outstanding naval hero of the 1798-1800 naval war with France after the victory of his ship, the Constellation, over the Vengeance. After his retirement, Truxtun lived in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. He was prominent in Philadelphia politics as a leader in the 1809
agitation against the Embargo; as an unsuccessful Federalist candidate for Congress in 1810; and as sheriff of Philadelphia, 1816-1819. Truxtun's landlord relationship with 421 Locust Street, therefore, gives that structure an association of some historic interest.

In its setting, 421 Locust Street appears in a different light. It is on the one residential middle-class streets in the Park. The Walnut Street buildings represent upper-class life in Philadelphia; the Locust Street buildings represent a less ambitious mode of life.

Viewed from the main Park area, looking southward from Walnut Street through Area "B," the house and its neighbor at 423 Locust Street, present a readily interpretable vista. Included in the general setting are the Tribute Garden across the street, the splendid Shippen-Wistar house at the corner of Locust and Fourth Streets, and the garden of the Philadelphia Contributionship to the east. Although Captain Truxtun's ownership of the property is of some historic interest, it is as a feature of an historic locale that the building assumes its importance.

For these reasons, it is recommended that the house at 421 Locust Street be preserved as a landscape feature and restored to its original appearance.
Chapter II
Illustration No. 1

421 Locust is the short, boxy building in the center. This is the appearance of the structure in 1950, prior to government acquisition of the property.
This photograph, taken December 1, 1953, shows, in a close-up view of 421 Locust Street, the detail of the 19th century cornice and the outline of the back building erected after the 1820 insurance survey.
Rear view of 421 Locust Street, undergoing repairs, April 20, 1954, shows the non-original rear dormer and brick-walled room on first floor (both features were added after the 1820 insurance survey).
Recent view of structure at 421 Locust (423 Locust has since been restored) shows repaired building. Note the removal of the 19th century cornice.