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Conservancy efforts add Keewaydin estate Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

Posted on March 13, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/03/13/conservancy-efforts-add-keewaydin-estate-philadelphia-register-of-historic-places/>), updated on March 13, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/03/13/conservancy-efforts-add-keewaydin-estate-philadelphia-register-of-historic-places/>) by Pete Mazzaccaro (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/pete/>)



Keewaydin photographed in 1905.

by Kate Dolan

The main house of the Keewaydin estate, set back on a deep lawn off Cherokee St. in a quiet and woodsy section of Chestnut Hill, does not look much different today than it did in a photograph taken in 1905, 15 years after it was built. The exterior of Wissahickon schist,

the stone archways leading to the house's two flanking buildings — the ballroom and kitchen and service wing — and a pedimented portico all still stand. The current owners' two silver vans parked at the top of the neat driveway tell you it's 2020, but otherwise, like many homes in the Chestnut Hill Historic District, the history takes over the story.

And now, this history is officially protected. In February, Keewaydin was listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, making its status as a historically significant property an official designation. This designation will protect and preserve the Dutch Colonial Revival estate and ensures that future development or renovations won't diminish the value and integrity of the historical resource. The house, as was feared by neighbors and the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, can not be demolished, at least not without considerable review by the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

"It had already been on our radar as a historically significant building in the Chestnut Hill National Register, as a work of architecture that was not protected," said Lori Salganicoff, Executive Director at the conservancy. "Keewaydin represents part of the community's history, architecturally and also socially."



The main house of Keewaydin at 7709 Cherokee St.

Keewaydin, named for the northwest wind in "The Song of Hiawatha" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was originally a five-acre estate built in 1889, for E.W. Clark, an investment banker in Philadelphia, and his wife, Lydia Jane Clark, by architect George T. Pearson. Additional construction continued until 1912, and the estate stayed in the Clark family until 1946.

In 1948, it was subdivided into several parcels, and the ballroom and kitchen and service wing were converted into single-family homes. These three parcels, the main house at 7709 Cherokee St., the ballroom at 545 Mermaid Lane and the kitchen and service wing at 540 West Moreland, all zoned as RSD-1 single-family residences, comprise the properties in the designation and the Keewaydin Estate.

A one-alarm fire in the kitchen and service wing in January 2019 set off the nomination process to protect the smoke-damaged wing, the estate's buildings and the open space. Submitted and funded by the conservancy, the nomination effort was agreed upon by Robin and Walter Sommers, owners of the main house and Don Ratchford and Nancy Dickson, owners of the ballroom. All parties involved were aware of the risk in letting the kitchen and service wing sit, unprotected in a time when pressure to develop is everywhere in the city.



The former kitchen wing burned last year and is currently boarded up.

"The chance of [the kitchen and service wing] being lost would be a shame. It sits so well on the property. The two wings are the same footprints, essentially," said Ratchford. "It's one large estate. We're not just trying to protect the service quarters — we're trying to protect Keewaydin as it is."

The Sommers have lived in the main house since 1978 and recall a few buildings in Chestnut Hill and surrounding areas like Wyndmoor, with great historical significance that are no longer around. After the fire happened, and Lori called, they had one response.

"All we had to say was, 'Save it,'" Robin said.

The nomination was submitted to the Philadelphia Historical Commission in March 2019. Written by historic preservationist Ben Leech, it cited the estate's Dutch Colonial Revival architectural style and the architectural legacy of Pearson as criteria for historical designation. The role of the Clark family as socialites in Chestnut Hill and in the industries of Philadelphia were also pointed to as criteria exemplifying "the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community."

"There is a vulnerability for Chestnut Hill to change," Salganicoff said, adding that historic and environmental resources are under-protected. Keewaydin also stands in the Wissahickon Watershed, providing another reason development is limited.

"It's not about stopping change. It's about managing the evolution to continue to expect high design and open space and green space. Smart growth is recreating what was originally created here," said Salganicoff. "We've got almost 100 mid-century buildings here."

"It's a historical building. Chestnut Hill is known for that, and we'd hate to lose a part of that," said Ratchford. "It's considered the garden district. If we start chopping this up in small pieces, we're going to lose that term. People will look back and say, 'Why was it called the garden district?'"

The servant and kitchen wing still stands. Its windows are presently boarded up and the home is in need of work. In April 2019, it sold to a developer with a King of Prussia address called Ganos LLC. Plans for the property and the house are not known at this time. Any development occurring on the property will have to be reviewed by the Philadelphia Historic Commission.

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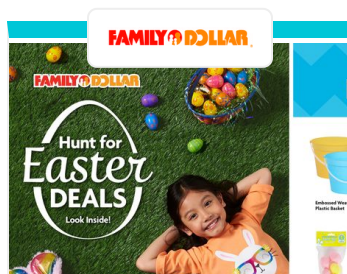
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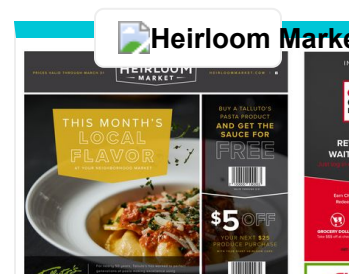
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