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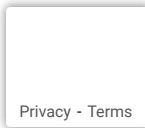
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PRESERVATION

Historic House in Chestnut Hill Saved at the 11th Hour

MARCH 27, 2023 | [by Alan Jaffe](#)

In late January, chain-link fencing was installed along the perimeter of the .9-acre property at 399 East Willow Grove Avenue in Chestnut Hill. Still more alarming, a backhoe appeared in the front yard. Neighbors learned that the new owner had been granted a permit for the demolition of the house at the corner of East Willow Grove and Crittendon Street. This is not just any house. Teviot, a name that evokes 17th century peerage and the River Teviot that flows in southern Scotland, was designed in 1888 by Wilson Eyre Jr., one of the most distinctive architects that practiced in the Philadelphia region.





Alarms sounded in Chestnut Hill when a security fence went up and demolition equipment appeared at 399 East Willow Grove Avenue in January. | Photo: Michael Bixler

A month later, fears of the imminent loss of Teviot were mostly abated. Conversations between property owner Kenneth Curry and Lori Salganicoff, executive director of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, as well as City Councilmember Cindy Bass, have resulted in the removal of the demolition equipment and ongoing talks about the potential preservation of Teviot.

“Kenneth Curry told me that he had not been aware that there had been deed restrictions” on the property when he purchased it, Salganicoff said. “And he had not been aware of the significance of the house or that there was a significant architect associated with it. He wisely decided to pull

back on his original plan and reconsider his options.” However, according to the Department of Licenses and Inspections, [the demolition permit is still active](#). Salganicoff [wrote in a February editorial in the *Chestnut Hill Local*](#) that the deed restricts new construction and subdivision of the site, but it may not prevent the home from being razed.

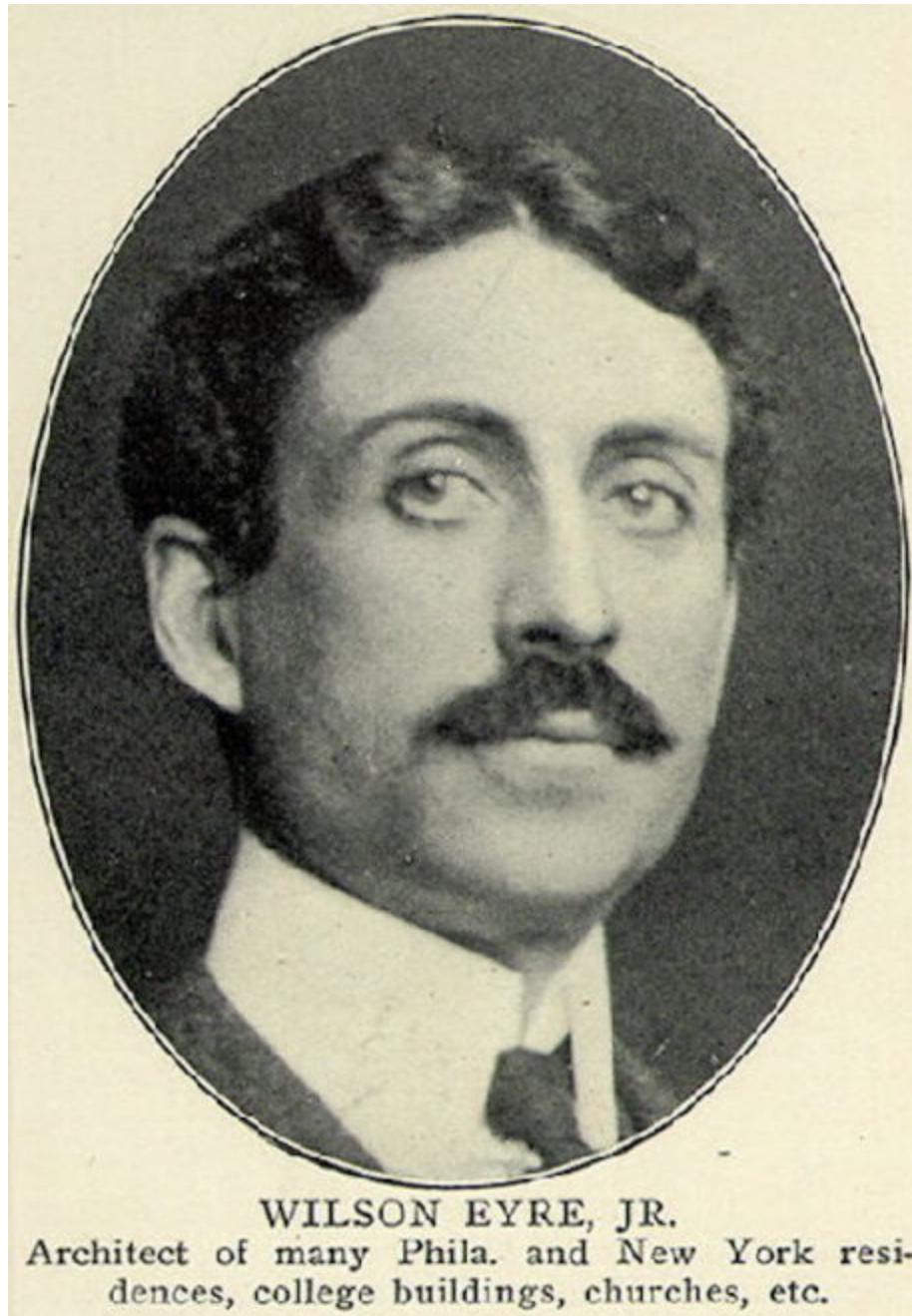
Part of an Architectural Legacy

Teviot is not listed on the [Philadelphia Register of Historic Places](#), so it doesn't have the protections that can be provided by the Philadelphia Historical Commission. But the house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a significant building in the [Chestnut Hill Historic District](#).

The houses of Chestnut Hill comprise what developer Richard Snowden, managing partner of Bowman Properties, has called “a museum collection of buildings and landscapes.” They range from the Benezet Street twins designed by Duhring, Okie, and Zeigler and the mansions created by George Howe in the 1910s to midcentury modern masterpieces by Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi, and Romaldo Giurgola. Wilson Eyre Jr. was an early contributor to the architectural legacy of Chestnut Hill.

Jeff Cohen, a professor of architectural history at Bryn Mawr College, said Eyre had “a very long career, but it had a sudden start. The architect with whom he was training, James Peacock Sims, died suddenly at his drafting table in 1882.” Eyre, at age 23, took over the practice. “His wasn't so much a singular personal style as an extremely visual attention to composition in volumes, textures, and colors, embodied within styles as they changed course from decade to decade.” In 1994 Cohen curated a

gallery exhibition of Eyre's drawings, photographs, and scrapbooks, *Graced Places: The Architecture of Wilson Eyre,*" at the University of Pennsylvania.



A portrait of Wilson Eyre Jr. from the 1901 edition of *Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians* by Moses King. |

Image courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

“Different chapters in his work have been cast as Queen Anne, Shingle Style, Arts and Crafts, and the more generic Academic Eclecticism, but Eyre’s designs almost always offered a certain spark or grace that marked them, setting them apart from those of most of his contemporaries,” Cohen said.

In 1883, in his mid-20s, Eyre was hired by manufacturer Charles Adam Potter to build a house at Evergreen Avenue and Prospect Street in Chestnut Hill. Eyre designed a sprawling Queen Anne style home with a mix of materials and architectural details—corbeled chimneys, broad gables, and an eyelid dormer attic window. The house was also set at a jaunty angle facing the intersection, hence its name The Anglecot, i.e. “angle cottage.” The home had become a sanatorium by the mid-20th century, but was restored, subdivided, and converted into condominiums by Richard Snowden in the 1980s.

The Teviot Commission





The Angelcot at 401 E. Evergreen Avenue was built in 1883. | Photo: Michael Bixler

Joseph Howell Burroughs commissioned Eyre, who was already building a national reputation, to design a house on East Willow Grove Avenue in 1888. Eyre had “come right out of the gate” with The Angelcot, Cohen said. “Although just a handful of years apart and relatively close to one another, The Angelcot and Teviot are very different.”

“The Anglecot displays its front almost inescapably, turning it diagonally across the site to directly face the more common city approaches. Teviot is more withdrawn from the street, revealing itself incrementally among its trees as one enters the grounds. It presents itself as a more volumetrically active form, with less classicizing detail such as The Angelcot’s rhyming pediments. This is not so much a change in style as a

change in house type, leaning toward the rustic half of the definition of a suburban home,” Cohen explained.

Teviot also “picks up on a national movement, pioneered in summer houses by Eyre’s peers at seaside sites like Newport or the Maine coast that presented themselves as assembled volumes unified by continuous textures flowing into one another, with one-story horizontal bands defined by materials such as stone, stucco, shingles, and slates, and often informalized with expansive wooden porches for indoor/outdoor living in the warmer seasons. The best-known of these seashore houses often wore a continuous cloak of unpainted shingles, retrospectively giving such work of this sort the name ‘Shingle style,’” said Cohen. “At Teviot, the stuccoed upper walls play much the same role as shingled surfaces in seaside and suburban houses emulating them during a key moment in Eyre’s work,” as the architect “moved away from Queen Anne detail and turned more to the harmonies of shapes and material textures.”

The description of Teviot in the Chestnut Hill Historic District’s inventory notes the two-and-a-half story structure’s “stone ground floor, stuccoed second floor, hipped roof, turret on the southwest cornice, hipped dormers, hipped one-story porch, ground floor entrance porch, arched openings on first floor, and stone sills on second floor.”

Preserving What Remains

The Burroughs family sold Teviot in 1910. It was sold again in 1943. The home was purchased in 1948 by Harvey and Hilda Davis, and they subdivided the property into four lots in 1963. The corner lot containing the main house was sold in 1968 to Marilynn and George Wills, who died in 2020 and 2021. Teviot was then sold by their daughter in 2022 to

Kenneth Curry and Yvonne Thomas. The house had been occupied until October 2021, Salganicoff said.

While she hasn't had an opportunity to see the interior, Salganicoff said a friend of the prior owners had helped them move out of Teviot. "He was surprised by how much there was remaining of the architectural character inside," said Salganicoff. She has heard that a number of ornate, interior features, including stained glass windows and wall moldings, are still intact. The previous owners were under the impression that the house would not be torn down and that the new owner would be renovating the building and "keeping it as it is," Salganicoff said.



Lycoming, the former residence of William Jay Turner at 3005 W. School House Lane, was built in 1907 and designed by Wilson Eyre Jr. It was demolished in 2018 by Penn Charter School for extra athletic fields. | Photo courtesy of The Keeping Society of Philadelphia

According to Cohen, Eyre designed “hundreds of buildings, distinctive and rarely repetitive in form, reaching to Maine and Virginia, and west to Ohio. The great majority, though, are in and near Philadelphia, sounding notes of visual harmony and engaging detail.”

Eyre’s smaller urban house designs have been “continually subject to pressures of downtown real estate values that claimed or altered many. Suburban houses seemed safer, with some painful exceptions,” explained Cohen, citing a house on Schoolhouse Lane that was demolished in 2018. That 1907 property, called Lycoming, had been [nominated for listing on the Philadelphia Register](#) by Oscar Beisert, historic preservationist and founder of [The Keeping Society of Philadelphia](#). Beisert’s 49-page nomination included this assessment of the architect’s impact: “Eyre’s designs, including the subject property, made a strong statement for the beauty that came from the artful blending of house and garden, convenience, art, craft, and nature—in effect the essence of the Arts and Crafts movement in its Philadelphia manifestation.” However, the owner had already obtained a demolition permit when Beisert filed his nomination, and Lycoming was razed to allow the expansion of playing fields for Penn Charter School.





The Sally Watson House was built in 1886. | Photo: Michael Bixler

But Beisert carries on his own personal efforts to preserve the legacy of Eyre. Two years ago he purchased a house designed by the architect. Sarah (Sally) Watson commissioned Eyre in 1886 to build the relatively small home that was referred to as “the queerest house in Germantown,” said Beisert. The entrance of the two-and-a-half story house is on the side of the structure rather than facing the main thoroughfare. The roof has a semicircular projection over the front porch, “like a stern of a ship turned upside down,” mused Beisert. The house has “an odd design, though it’s really a very simple form.” A chimney rises up the middle of the front of the house, which also has a large circular window.

Watson sold the house in 1906, and a church owned the building next. The interior has remained intact, including the casement windows,

doors, floors, fireplaces, and a unique stairwell. The interior was altered somewhat by the church, “so I’ve been deinstitutionalizing the insides,” he said. “What’s also unusual about this house is that it’s small. It’s a house a middle-class person could afford,” Beisert explained, as opposed to the sprawling country houses the architect was often asked to create.

More Than One Building

Preserving historic buildings like Teviot requires a constant vigil. “The preservation community tries to keep up with friendly persuasion and historic designation protection,” Cohen said. “But quiet plans to demolish by private owners sometimes advance before the community becomes aware of them. Sometimes you learn too late when something’s in process.”

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy is trying find the right approach to protect Teviot. “We stand ready to help however we can to make preservation of that property make sense,” Salganicoff said, through assistance with resources, rehabilitation, adaptation, or funding opportunities for the owner.





The future of Teviot remains uncertain, but demolition appears to be no longer in the cards. | Photo: Michael Bixler

The future of Teviot is about more than one structure and one architect. “Chestnut Hill is like a lot of communities. It’s at an inflection point where there are a number of larger buildings created for single families that are being bought for single-family use. Then there are some that are not finding single-family use because of where they are sited or for various other reasons,” she said. “These buildings that are part of the fabric of the built environment and contribute to the significance of the community. It’s really important that we start to find ways to reuse them,” while adding density and “capacity for new families that will then move into the community,” Salganicoff explained. “We would like for the city to find ways to incentivize the adaptive reuse of historic buildings across the

city” and for developers to see “adaptive reuse is an attractive possibility,” she said. “It’s about the building itself, but also what that building represents.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Jaffe is the assignment editor and project manager of FactCheck.org at Annenberg Public Policy Center. He is a former editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and a contributing writer of Extant, Billy Penn, and Plan Philly.

10 Comments:

1. *John Regula* says:

[March 27, 2023 at 1:02 pm](#)

How unfortunate that Wilson Eyre Jr. wasn't the teacher of our current group of architects. The Sally Watson House has more character and visual appeal than virtually every rowhouse built in the city in the last twenty years.

[Leave a Reply](#)

2. *Sharon* says:

[March 27, 2023 at 7:34 pm](#)

I can't imagine what kind of person would want to destroy such a beautiful house let alone one made with stone. No one does that anymore. Find a hoarder's house beyond repair and knock that down instead. And build another poorly made house of today.

[Leave a Reply](#)

3. *Evan Ballard* says:

[March 27, 2023 at 7:44 pm](#)

I really enjoyed the story. I served newspapers when I was a kid on Wayne Ave

[Leave a Reply](#)

4. *Terri Werner* says:

[March 27, 2023 at 11:19 pm](#)

Having grown up in Gtn.
in 1931, I have always liked the large houses in
GTN. Chestnut Hill and
Mt. AIRY. They are a treasure and part of our heritage.



Everything you can do preserve our past
is a bright spot for our
Future. Share these homes and our early history for all who
choose to live in this beautiful area.

[Leave a Reply](#)

5. *shannon* says:

[March 28, 2023 at 6:36 pm](#)

L&I is bent on destroying the City and architectural heritage.
There's not much left to destroy and replace with cardboard kit
houses. Now it's moving into the more well preserved historic
areas. Another reason why Philadelphia will never get its footing
back as a world class city.

[Leave a Reply](#)

6. *Stephen* says:

[March 29, 2023 at 9:46 am](#)

Thank you for this story. I believe every building that becomes
100 yrs old should automatically be preserved from demolition.
And the entity that seeks to demolish it must prove that it is not
historically or architecturally worth of that automatic
preservation protection before demolish. The onus should be
on the developer.

[Leave a Reply](#)

7. *Kelli Alverest* says:

[March 29, 2023 at 9:58 am](#)

I really enjoy reading this historical take on preserving sound
structures graced by magnificent architects. They don't build

homes like they use too. Please, keep finding away to enhance them. Not raze them

[Leave a Reply](#)

8. *James* says:

[March 31, 2023 at 5:09 pm](#)

I have driven down Wayne Street and have seen plenty of old houses needing a stucco job or a new roof. Easy to say the owners can fix/upgrade the houses without considering how will the owners finance the renovations on retirement income. Philadelphia demolishes between 10-20 abandoned, dilapidated row houses a day and easy to say they could be renovated when it is in poor structural condition.

[Leave a Reply](#)

9. *Joseph Edwards* says:

[April 4, 2023 at 10:19 am](#)

My property, my choice.

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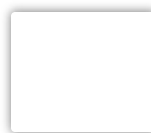
10. *Unknown* says:

[November 15, 2023 at 12:24 pm](#)

Thank you so much for the beautiful article about Teviot, that was our home for 55 years. I'm still going through all of my parents photos, and I will be happy to share them with you in the near future.

The home was deeply loved by us and all the guests we entertained through the years, some of those gatherings were quite unforgettable and happily live on in my memory.

Again Allen, thank you so much



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