

Abolition Hall in Historic Plymouth Meeting Village, Montgomery County, PA:

An open letter to elected officials and others

July 11, 2018

We are writing to convey our profound concern over the proposed subdivision and townhouse development plan for the historic Corson homestead at Butler and Germantown Pikes, in the heart of the Plymouth Meeting National Historic Register District. As drawn, this plan fails to recognize the unmatched and nuanced history of this once busy station on the Underground Railroad.

The development proposal under review by the Whitemarsh Township Board of Supervisors depicts 67 townhouses, clustered in groups of four and five units. They will be erected upon land that had been continuously cultivated since the mid-1700s, land that helped sustain the Corson family (and the generation before them) during the half-century of anti-slavery activism that made this homestead a hub of Underground Railroad activities. Furthermore, the development comes within 50 feet of Abolition Hall, which George Corson constructed in 1856 to welcome seekers and speakers, including Frederick Douglass, Lucretia Mott, and William Lloyd Garrison.

Compounding this failure is the absence of an appropriate accommodation of the homestead's subsequent historical chapter; in 1881 internationally acclaimed genre artist Thomas Hovenden married into the Corson family, and it was here that he painted *The Last Moments of John Brown*, a work that has long been in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Based on these details, we could argue that no development should take place at this site—that its role in our nation's history is unparalleled. In fact, in 2017, the US Department of the Interior issued a letter in which it noted that the original nomination “minimized significant historical associations that might have caused scholars in recent decades to reconsider the property for additional eligibility, including NHL [National Historic Landmarks] eligibility.” Like the Friends of Abolition Hall, the citizens group granted standing and now objecting to the current plan, we, too, respect private property rights, and believe that the historical significance of this homestead demands a far better plan. Such a plan is within reach, providing the parties agree to negotiate a compromise, and local, county, and state officials rise to the challenge of bringing public resources to the table.

In 1969, Nancy Corson, great-granddaughter of George Corson, wrote of her ancestral homestead, “In the interest of preserving both historic and natural resources, this entire property should be registered as a Historic Place by the National Park Service.” Indeed, in early 1971, the US Department of the Interior certified the nominations of the Plymouth Meeting Historic District and those of six contributing properties, including the Corson homestead and its three historic structures--Hovenden House and Abolition Hall/Stone Barn.

But it is Whitemarsh Township's own ordinances that make the especially clear and compelling case against the proposed subdivision and townhouse plan. Chapter 10 of the Township Code opens with this statement, “...it is the purpose and intent of the Township to promote, protect, enhance, perpetuate, and preserve historic districts...” This statement of purpose closes with, “...and to preserve and protect the cultural, historical and architectural assets of the Township for which the Township has been determined to be of local, state or national, historical and/or architectural significance.” If approved without modification, the development proposal presently under review undermines the integrity of the

Plymouth Meeting Historic District and threatens the National Register listing of the Hovenden House and Abolition Hall/Stone Barn.

Additionally, Chapter 116 of the Code--Zoning, which governs the specific standards upon which the Township's Board of Supervisors will approve or reject the proposed plan, allows development "...while preserving and restoring the distinct architectural character of historic areas of Whitemarsh Township..." This same section requires that development of land for residential use "Implements the Comprehensive Plan." In 2013, after review by local and county planning commissions, a public hearing, and discussion by the Board of Supervisors, the Township unanimously adopted a resolution amending its Comprehensive Plan, thereby designating the land upon which the townhouses are to be constructed as a Priority Open Space parcel. Clearly, the proposed development fails to meet the Township Zoning Code.

The Corson homestead is hallowed ground. The families that lived and worked there are heroes in the narrative of our nation; the men, women, and children who fled the abomination of slavery, reaching well beyond their grasp despite overwhelming odds, deserve to be remembered.

We call upon the Philadelphia Inquirer to print an editorial that recommends the suspension of the Conditional Use hearing now unfolding before the Whitemarsh Township Board of Supervisors, pending the outcome of bona fide negotiations that include the developer and the objectors. Additionally, we implore Whitemarsh Township, Montgomery County, and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to harness public resources for use in supporting a site plan that respects the resonant history of this homestead.

Very truly yours,

Charles L. Blockson, Curator Emeritus and
Founder, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American
Collection Temple University Libraries; Former
Chairperson, National Park Service
Underground Railroad Advisory Committee

William C. Bolger, National Historic Landmarks
Program Manager (Retired), Northeast
Region, National Park Service

Reverend Jay Broadnax, President, Black Clergy
of Philadelphia and Vicinity

Craig E. Brooks, President, Plymouth Meeting
Historical Society

David B. Brownlee, FSAH, Shapiro-
Weitzenhoffer Professor of the History of Art,
University of Pennsylvania

Walton C. Burwell, President, Pennsylvania
Abolition Society

V. Chapman-Smith, Public historian and
educator; Member, Pennsylvania Abolition
Society

Michael Coard, Attorney, Avenging the
Ancestors Coalition

Mina Cockroft, General Manager, Historic Eden
Cemetery

Mindy Gulden Crawford, Executive Director,
Preservation Pennsylvania

Mary Werner DeNadai, FAIA, Chair,
Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

James M. Duffin, Founding Member, RePoint
Philadelphia

Kathleen A. Foster, The Robert L. McNeil, Jr.,
Senior Curator of American Art and Director,
Center for American Art, Philadelphia
Museum of Art

Charles Gibbs, Esquire, President, Philadelphia
Barristers' Association

Rev. Greg Holston, Executive Director,
P.O.W.E.R.

Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, Professor of
History Emerita, Haverford College

John Meyerson, Past President, Montgomery
County (PA) Central Labor Council AFL-CIO

John Milner, FAIA, Principal, John Milner
Architects, Inc.

Minister Rodney Muhammad, President, NAACP
Philadelphia Branch

Myles S. Pettengill, President, Fort Washington
Historical Society

Barry Rauhauser, Executive Director, Historical
Society of Montgomery County

Lori Salganicoff, Planner, historic
preservationist, community development
professional

Paul Steinke, Executive Director, Preservation
Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Cornelia Swinson, Executive Director, Johnson
House Historic Site

Robert P. Thomas, AIA, Partner, Campbell
Thomas & Co. Architects

Diane D. Turner, Curator, Charles L. Blockson
Afro-American Collection, Temple University
Libraries

William R. Valerio, PhD, The Patricia Van Burgh
Allison Director and CEO, Woodmere Art
Museum

Loretta C. Witt, President, Historic Germantown

Aaron Wunsch, Assistant Professor, Graduate
Program in Historic Preservation, University of
Pennsylvania

Sylvia Yount, Lawrence A. Fleischman Curator in
Charge, American Wing, The Metropolitan
Museum of Art