



The Historical Society of Frankford

1507 Orthodox Street
Frankford, Philadelphia, PA 19124
www.thehistoricalsocietyoffrankford.com
215-743-6030

Preserving and presenting the history of Frankford and vicinity

April 1, 2025

Emily Cooperman, PhD
Chair, Committee on Historic Designation
Philadelphia Historical Commission
1515 Arch Street, 13th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Dear Dr. Cooperman and members of the Committee on Historic Designation:

The Board of Directors of the Historical Society of Frankford has received notice that Joseph J. Menkevich nominated our building, 1507 Orthodox Street, for inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. We appreciate Mr. Menkevich's efforts, but we respectfully contest this nomination as premature, incomplete, and sometimes inaccurate. The Historical Society of Frankford is a 120-year-old organization dedicated to collecting, preserving, and presenting the social, economic, cultural, and architectural history of Frankford and the surrounding area. We believe that members of our institution, or persons we designate, are best qualified to prepare and present any public documentation of the significance of its history and that of its 1930 building. Had we contracted with a historian to compile a nomination for Philadelphia's register, we would not have considered the document under review acceptable for submission. We believe this nomination to be hastily prepared and lacking important criteria that would demonstrate the significance of the Historical Society of Frankford. We will provide specific criticisms that we believe will corroborate our position that Mr. Menkevich has not adequately provided documentation to meet the two "Criteria for Designation" that he has identified.

The board of the Historical Society of Frankford is not averse to the idea of historical recognition, but we feel that process should be one we spearhead ourselves. For the past several years, the board has prioritized gathering information from public records and our extensive archives to complete an application for historic designation through the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's State Historic Preservation Office. We believe the criteria for the Pennsylvania Register of Historic Places, as the state arm of the National Register of Historic Places, may be more compatible with our institution's mission and historical strengths. The HSF board believes that developing a nomination for the Philadelphia Register in 2030, the centennial of our building's construction, is an important subsequent goal.

Before addressing the nomination form itself, we assume that the notation under "7. Significance," that the "Period of Significance" is "from 1930 to 1930," is a typographical error. The Historical Society of Frankford's significance and mission, as described above, continues to the present day.

Nomination Form

1. **Location**—The reference to the Jolly Post Tavern is misleading and irrelevant to the significance of the Historical Society’s 1930 building. Mr. Menkevich’s nomination shows a February 18, 1814, map of the estate of George Webster. On April 1, 1814, Webster’s widow Esther sold to merchant Jacob Coates the Jolly Post hotel (on Main Street/Frankford Avenue) and property along what is now Orthodox Street from Main Street to the Overington estate on Leiper Street (Deed Book MR10, 101-103). About 1850, with the death of Coates’ widow, the property was subdivided into more than fifty lots and sold by Coates’ executor Joshua Pierce. The Historical Society’s 1930 building is situated on what were lots 22-24, first sold in 1864. (See #5 below)
5. **Boundary Description**—Some historical context would be helpful here. Joshua Pierce began advertising the Coates’ lots for sale in the 1850s, but none on Orthodox Street was purchased until 1864. The deed recorded in Deed Book LRB 147, 464-66 (cited by Menkevich from the 1920 Smedley deeds), confirms that Anna Broun Watson’s parents sold her Coates lots 22 and 23 (1507 Orthodox). The original deed is difficult to read, but other sources show that her mother’s first name was generally spelled “Merittes,” not “MRRITTES” as it appears in the nomination. John G. Kemp purchased lot 24 (1505 Orthodox) on July 14, 1864 (Deed Book LRB 45, 175-77). Kemp was the brother-in-law of organ builder John Roberts, who bought lots 25-27 for his residence and workshop at Penn and Orthodox Streets in 1865 and 1866. In 1875, Kemp sold lot 24 to Daniel S. Hallowell (DHL 15, 506-507). In 1884, Hallowell sold it to Hannah Rodgers (JOD 201, 63-65).
6. **Description: General & Historical**—Considering that the purpose of the Historical Society’s building was—and is—to preserve its historic collections, this description demonstrates a lack of understanding of the society’s holdings and its current efforts to improve both preservation and access. The information was gleaned from generic guidebooks to Philadelphia collecting institutions, not from research in the Historical Society of Frankford’s rich archives. HSF board member Frederick Prescott has researched the building’s documentation in our archives and compiled a short history of the Historical Society and its property, which is available to our research and program visitors. Mr. Prescott’s essay provides more details than this nomination.

There are many inaccuracies and omissions in this section. First, the building permit used as an illustration on the first page of this section is not the one for the 1930 building under review, but rather a 1920 permit for alterations to the old Samuel and Anna Watson family home at 1507 Orthodox. A longtime member of the Historical Society, architect Frank R. Watson desired that his vacant family home and its grounds be used for the Society’s purposes, precipitating William Smedley’s purchase of the property for \$5000 and its transfer to the Historical Society.

Mr. Menkevich cites the two 1920 deeds related to the purchase of 1507 Orthodox and the 1927 deed related to the purchase of 1505 from the Rodgers family, but does not note the significance of that time gap. The Society used the former Watson home as its headquarters for meetings and collections preservation for several years, making various alterations to improve utility. However, the organization was already outgrowing the space when in 1927 the Rodgers family offered 1505 Orthodox Street for sale, allowing the society to purchase the adjoining lot. The society’s annual report for 1929 confirms that the organization was still considering expanding the old building, perhaps by merging it with 1505. In March 1930, the HSF board resolved to demolish the existing structures and replace them with a modern, fireproof building. HSF archival records are unclear about the selection of Frank R. Watson as architect, but they suggest that his services were likely a gift. He supported the demolition of his old home to allow for construction of the new building.

“New Home of the Historical Society”—Caroline Smedley focuses on the modern structure that will preserve and make accessible a large collection of important archival materials and artifacts, noting that it was “modernly equipped and fire-proof throughout.” She describes some of its architectural elements, but emphasizes its usefulness for preservation and access, not its significance as a landmark structure. Ms. Smedley does not mention the architect’s name, but highlights the Smedley donation.

The Colonial Doorway of the Samuel Wakeling House—The “Allengrove” door is one of the important artifacts that have been preserved as part of the Historical Society of Frankford’s collections. However, much of what is included on this page is extraneous to the significance of the society’s mission and building.

Physical Description—The architectural description compiled by board member Frederick Prescott, easily accessible to visitors, provides greater detail than is presented here. Mr. Menkevich’s captions for images 16 and 17 note that gates were locked when he took his photographs. He was not denied access. Board members of the Historical Society of Frankford were not notified that Menkevich was compiling this application until it had been submitted to the Philadelphia Historical Commission. Image 21 shows a “wooden framed bulletin board” that is not original to the building. It was added recently and was designed to mimic the limestone memorial marker that is original to the building.

7. Statement of Significance

Criterion J:

The author has cited the meetings of only two groups—the DAR and the Frankford Woman’s Club—to represent this “extremely significant” building. However, its function as a meeting place for outside groups was ancillary to its primary mission to preserve and make accessible its collections and to provide programming about those collections. The most significant meetings were those of the Historical Society of Frankford itself, featuring lectures by a wide range of experts and on a variety of topics. A review of the *Papers Read* catalog at the Historical Society would have demonstrated this.

This section demonstrates the inattentive editing that is found elsewhere in the nomination. The “decedents” of Betsy Ross would not have been meeting anywhere, so we assume the author means “descendants.” According to the DAR Flag House Chapter’s website, it “was founded by thirteen descendents [*sic*] of Betsy Griscom Ross in the Frankford section of Philadelphia.” Menkevich identifies Ross as the “designer of the Stars and Stripes”—likely meant as a throwaway line—but by 1930 there would already have been discussion about the accuracy of that designation. Regarding the Frankford Woman’s Club, the Historical Society of Frankford would be better recognized as the repository for their archival materials, which are available for research.

“Big Pageant Shows Frankford Growth”—The Historical Society of Frankford participated in historical and industrial pageants in the neighborhood from the organization’s founding. But the two events mentioned as evidence of “significance” did not take place in the building that is currently being reviewed. They were fundraisers for the Historical Society of Frankford and its new building, but both were held at the estate of William Overington at Orthodox and Leiper Streets. The “new headquarters” at 1507 Orthodox Street in 1920 and 1923 would have been the Watson home.

Criterion E:

The author has clarified some of the confusion regarding the Watsons’ 1507 Orthodox Street home and the 1930 building designed by Frank R. Watson, which used that address after his childhood home had been torn down. Yet, in the 1930 “Museum to Open Soon” article, the focus remains on the Smedleys and the primary purpose of the building—the permanent preservation of the archives and artifacts collected by the society for the previous 25 years. The architect’s name is not included.

Summary & Conclusion

Frank R. Watson is widely known as a significant architect in “church design” in Philadelphia. At least eight of his churches are on the Philadelphia Register. Yet, of the three churches he designed in Frankford—St. Luke’s Reformed Episcopal Church (1890; now owned by Frankford Friends School), St. Mark’s Episcopal Church (renovation, 1907), and Seventh United Presbyterian Church (addition, 1907; now Word of Faith Church)—none has been nominated. The nomination for Watson’s Roman Catholic Church of the Epiphany, 1101 Jackson Street (2021), includes many details about St. Mark’s as “one of Watson’s most demanding and important projects.” (p. 20) Considering that St. Mark’s remains an active house of worship, it is unclear why a 1930 Georgian revival building would be chosen to represent Watson’s work in Frankford rather than an important example of his church architecture. Records in the Historical Society’s archives allude to the reason behind the choice of the Georgian revival architecture. Members believed it was suggestive of the days of Franklin and Washington. Given the scope of the society’s collections, the building would reflect its contents.

Mr. Menkevich provides nine pages of extensive detail on Frank R. Watson’s biography, but half of them relate to events and projects outside of Frankford. Curiously, he notes that Watson was married in the old St. Mark’s Church, but not that he designed the 1907 church that he pictures on page 18. The “Appendix” on Samuel Huckel is completely extraneous, particularly given the scant attention in the nomination to the significance of the Historical Society of Frankford. Menkevich never mentions Watson’s longtime membership in the Historical Society of Frankford, which influenced his decision to encourage the society to purchase his family’s property, tear down his old home, and create a new headquarters on the site. It is clear from the announcements about the new building that the Historical Society wanted to show an “historic” face but function in a modern way. Watson provided the society with the utilitarian building it needed, but with a façade that would fit into its historic neighborhood. Watson certainly would not have considered the 1930 Georgian revival building to have been a significant example of his oeuvre, particularly since there were already several fine examples of that within walking distance of 1507 Orthodox Street. That likely explains why his name as architect was not included in the newspaper articles heralding the new building.

In closing, based on the flaws we have noted above, we strongly recommend that this nomination be rejected. The Historical Society of Frankford will continue to accurately document its history for eventual inclusion in the city, state, and national historic registers.

Sincerely,



Jerry Kolankiewicz
President, Board of Directors
Historical Society of Frankford