National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

See instructions in How to Complete National Register Forms
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

Historic: Central Norristown Historic District

And/or common:

2. Location

Street & number: Area of Norristown generally bounded by Stoney Creek on the West, Walnut Street on the East, Lafayette Street on the South and Forrance Street on the North.

City, town: vicinity of Norristown

State: Pennsylvania

3. Classification

Category: 
- District
- Building(s)
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Ownership:
- Public
- Private
- Both

Public Acquisition: in process

Status: occupied

Accessible:
- Yes: restricted
- Yes: unrestricted

Present Use: 
- Agriculture
- Commercial
- Educational
- Entertainment
- Government
- Industrial
- Military
- Museum
- Park
- Private residence
- Religious
- Scientific
- Transportation
- Other:

4. Owner of Property

Name: Multiple Owners

5. Location of Legal Description

Courthouse, registry of deeds, etc.: Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds

Street & number: One Montgomery Plaza

City, town: Norristown

State: Pennsylvania 19401

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Title: Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form

Has this property been determined eligible? 
- Yes
- No

Date: May 1984

Federal: 
- X

State: 
- X

County: 
- 

Local: 
- 

Depository for survey records: Bureau for Historic Preservation

City, town: Harrisburg

State: Pennsylvania
Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The proposed Central Norristown Historic District is located one city block north of the Schuylkill River in the Borough of Norristown, which is approximately 24 miles northwest of Philadelphia and 36 miles southeast of Reading. The District is an L-shaped area of approximately 40 square blocks that encompasses the material diversity of a 19th and early 20th-century Pennsylvania industrial town: the original town's center, the county's present governmental complex, the borough's main business district, industrial sites, and both 19th and 20th-century residential neighborhoods. It contains over 1900 structures, including detached, row and duplex units of which about 1100 are in residential use while others are in a mix of residential, office and retail use. About 15 structures are industrial.

The District includes two valleys and two hills: Stoney Creek on the western edge, the hill dominated by the Montgomery County Courthouse; Sandy Hill at the eastern extension, and the valley of Saw Mill Run between these two hills. The District is bordered by East Main Street on the south and East Fornance Street on the north; its western boundary generally follows Stoney Creek and its eastern boundary generally follows Arch street but extends three blocks further along Marshall, Airy and Moore Streets.

Three historically identifiable, but contiguous and interdependent, areas make up the Central Norristown District. The old business and governmental center includes a three-block square that remains the core of the borough. Surrounding this historical center and extending eight blocks north and northeast is the old 19th-century residential district. Sandy Hill is a second residential area that includes mid and late 19th-century mansions and later row and semi-detached dwellings.

Most of the original 1784 Town of Norris is included in the old business and government center, whose focal point is the Montgomery county Courthouse. The past and present vitality of the Borough's core is indicated by the variety of buildings in this part of the District: the County jail, the YMCA, the mid-19th-century Odd Fellows Hall, three historic 19th-century churches, and a number of old commercial buildings.

Immediately surrounding this core are 19th-century dwellings, many of which have been converted to retail and office use. Some early 20th-century stores have been built among these former houses, especially on East Main Street, which gradually became the Borough's retail business district after trolleys began running in the 1880's, shifting the focus from the Courthouse square.

This process accelerated after the Philadelphia and Western passenger railway was completed in 1912 and tied into the trolley line to Allentown. The 1931 construction of the Philadelphia and Western passenger station on East Main Street opposite the courthouse recognized the fact that by the 1920's this was the Borough's nerve center.

A number of modest early 19th-century dwellings remain intact along Ann and Penn streets, on the site of the former Isaac Norris plantation. The most imposing houses, often built in clearly recognizable 19th-century architectural styles, stand on DeKalb and Swede Streets. Those on DeKalb Street, originally the homes of local
industrialists, tend to be of a finer architectural quality than those on Swede Street, where political and legal figures lived. The social influence of DeKalb Street extended a block to the west, where on Willow Street the small dwellings of the servant class were erected. Lining the smaller streets are row and semi-detached dwellings, punctuated by occasional churches, schools, fire houses, and corner groceries and saloons. Early 20th-century speculative housing forms the pattern in the northeastern reaches of the District.

Most of the manufacturing structures are scattered in the eastern end of the proposed District. Some, however, such as the former Scheidt Brewery, stand along Stoney Creek on the District's western border. Among these mills at the eastern end and greatly outnumbering them are modest brick residences. There are some single dwellings, particularly along Sandy Street, but most of the houses were built as twins or short rows of four or six units. Built for industrial workers, many of whom were immigrants or first-generation native-born, they are generally plain, sometimes devoid of distinguishing architectural features. A few, however, serve as showcases for ethnic brick masons who about the time of World War I enriched semi-detached dwellings with unique brick patterns. Rising above these modest dwellings on East Marshall Street are the few suburban villas that have survived from the mid-19th-century. They all have been altered and added to, but their great scale and ornamentation visually set them apart from the crowd.

Human scale and human care predominate throughout the District. The courthouse, of course, looms over the downtown area, as does One Montgomery Square, a 1970's high-rise office structure opposite the courthouse on Swede Street -- not in the District. Otherwise, only church spires rise above the three and four-story structures. Open areas, like the landscaped square in front of the courthouse and the green space surrounding the mid-19th-century Friends Meeting House at Swede and Jacoby Streets, counteract any feeling of congestion. Amenities like the great number of street clocks on Main, DeKalb, and Swede Streets combine with small visual reliefs like old shop identities laid in brass in the sidewalks to indicate that this is a place where people matter.

In summary, the proposed Central Norristown Historic District is richly diverse. Its architectural diversity is the material expression of an economic, ethnic, and social diversity representative of old industrial towns. Norristown's importance rests in part in the integrity of that architectural diversity.
8. Significance

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Specific dates 1800-1920 Builder Architect n/a

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Central Norristown Historic District is centered around the historical core of Montgomery County government. In 1784, Montgomery County was created out of Philadelphia County by an act of the Commonwealth. A 27 1/2 acre parcel in what is now Norristown Borough was stipulated to be purchased for the new county's seat of government, making it one of the earliest established in Pennsylvania.

The Historic District also includes much of the limits of Norristown at the time it was organized as a borough in 1812, which encompassed over 250 acres. These two areas, the old Town of Norris and 1812 borough, form the heart of the Central Historic District. But Norristown continued to expand. In 1852, about 2000 acres to the east, north and west were annexed to achieve Norristown's present bound areas. The District is not confined to the historic core, but includes virtually all areas of 19th century development east of Stoney Creek.

Due to its material diversity, variety and long history, tracing the growth and development of the Central District is complex. Several themes, however, are prominent: the growth of government; establishment of industries, institutions and stores; developments in transportation; and the diversity of its citizenry.

It must be remembered that central Norristown is the location of two levels of government, County and Borough. County government overshadowed Borough government for many years. Although the first courthouse was in place by 1791, the Borough, in contrast, did not erect a town hall until 1884. For over 30 years before that, council had met in the old Odd Fellows Building on DeKalb Street. In addition to its courthouse, which was rebuilt on a much grander scale in 1854 (and subsequently enlarged), the county maintained a prison in Norristown. Like the courthouse, the original prison was replaced with a more impressive structure, the 1851 masterpiece by architect Napoleon LeBrun. Both buildings continue to dominate the Central district today; the prison, in particular, exhibiting noteworthy architectural integrity. The Borough replaced its 1884 hall with another in 1894, but neither building remains. Although they may have shown little loyalty to their first municipal buildings, Norristonians were fiercely loyal to their form of government. Despite several movements, beginning in 1881 to adopt a city charter, Norristown clung to its borough organization, which was based on ward representation.

Ostensibly for reasons of economy, but more likely because they were happy with what they had, Norristonians defeated every attempt to become a city. In Centennial (1912) literature, Norristown proudly proclaimed itself "now the biggest, busiest, brightest Borough in the world." Its population at that time was 30,000, up from 500 in 1812. Important resources in the Central District associated with borough government are its fire associations, the first of which was established in 1812. By 1895 there were five throughout Norristown. Had the Borough become a city, these strong local
associations would have had to be abolished for a central department.

In addition to its significance as a governmental center, Norristown is important for its industry. The combination of county seat and industrial center was somewhat unusual. Factors which contributed to Norristown's growth of industry included its superb location on the Schuylkill River within 20 miles of Philadelphia; the water power furnished by two streams (Stoney Creek and Saw Mill Run) which drained into the river; transportation routes provided by the Schuylkill Canal (1826), the Reading Railroad (1834) and the later Pennsylvania Railroad (1884), and the entrepreneurial talents of its citizens. The first large textile mill was constructed in 1826. It was followed in 1836 by the Jamison (now DeKalb Street) Mills. Other mills processed grain, lumber and iron. A significant period of industrial growth occurred in the late 1870's and the 1880's. Although the sites of most industries are south of Washington Street adjacent to the Schuylkill River, the Central District does include several buildings associated with these old industries. Among these are Simpson's Mill (1884) and the Adam Scheidt (Schmidt's) Brewery (1905) along Stoney Creek, the Norristown Woolen Mills, Roberts Mills (est. 1790), and the Conte Luna (Arena) Macaroni Factory (est. 1915).

Quite naturally, Norristown's earliest institutions were clustered in its historic core. Many important ones remain. One of the Borough's earliest public schools, on Cherry Street, was constructed in 1854 and has now been adapted for law offices. Two churches which were founded about the same time as the Borough are still active in their original locations near the town center. Both St. John's Episcopal (est. 1812) and the First Presbyterian (est. 1819) Churches are historically and architecturally significant. Nearby is another architecturally outstanding church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Trinity, built in 1864 and enlarged in 1915. The 1852 Norristown Friends Meeting still stands in its original building at Swede and Jacoby. The District encompasses several other congregations, some of which had their origins in the downtown, but relocated further out as Norristown grew. Norristown's first bank, the Montgomery National bank (originally the Bank of Montgomery County, est. 1814) is housed on Main street in a building erected in 1854.

Norristown's Main Street, or central business district, is of key importance to the Central Historic District, just as it was through most of the Borough's history. It developed typically, from a few small houses and shops along Norristown's major 18th-century thoroughfare (then Egypt Road) into a flourishing business community by the early 20th-century. As a regional shopping center, it offered a wide variety of goods and services, from markets, department stores, banks, small shops, entertainment halls, and theaters to the headquarters of such noted organizations as the Masons and the Odd Fellows. Although Norristown's central business district is today punctuated with occasional vacant lots, many buildings do remain that represent a major aspect of Norristown's halcyon days as the "busiest, most confident borough in the world." The Survey and Design Guidelines (1980) points to Main street as a strong historic district "with exterior changes to old buildings more cosmetic than structural."

The growth and prosperity of Norristown was closely tied to advance in transportation. As noted earlier, the Schuylkill Canal and the Reading
Railroad were important factors in the Borough's early development, encouraging industry and individuals to locate there. The establishment of the trolley lines in the 1880's permitted extensive residential development north of the Borough's historic center. These horse drawn cars, introduced in 1884, ran up DeKalb Street as far as Brown and down Swede Street. Other lines were added in 1887. They were electrified in 1893 and two more trolley companies subsequently formed. Construction of the Philadelphia and Western electrified high speed line in 1912, which put Norristown within easy commuting distance of Philadelphia, was an additional stimulus to residential growth.

Norristown's citizenry breathed life, form, color and design into its government, institutions, industries and businesses. Who these people were and where and how they lived is an important theme behind the Central Historic District. It takes in early mansions of industrialists, such as the Jameson (1850), Elijah-Thomas (1856), Hooven (1850), and Gilinger (1856) mansions as well as late 19th-century expressions of the Gilded age. Along Willow Street the District includes the homes of the servant class and those of brewery workers among the Cherry Street rows. Along Penn and Anne Streets are the earliest remaining workers rows (1815-1830) in the Borough. The Sandy Hill rows provided new housing for Italian immigrant families at the turn of the century and today remains a strong Italian neighborhood. The District also includes the unique low income rowhousing erected in 1878-79 by the Wright A. Brinshurst estate as well as the mansions of the noted lawyers and politicians along Swede Street and industrialists and entrepreneurs along DeKalb Street.

The architecture of the Central District is, like the area's history and population, diverse. It represents virtually every important regional style from 1800 to the early 1900's. The District also is significant for its overall architectural integrity. It, like the West End Historic District, has survived the 20th-century (and urban renewal) relatively intact. This is particularly apparent in the residential areas of the District, where there has been minimal renovation, let alone alteration. The fact that most of the buildings have survived may indeed be indicative of their sensible design and high quality construction. The Central District encompasses the best this Borough/County Seat/Industrial Town/and just plain Nice Place to Live ever offered.

Because development in the proposed Central Norristown Historic District moved outward in roughly concentric arcs from the old Town of Norristown, architectural styles are found in similar topographical arcs with a separate arm of development in the Sandy Hill area.

Federal style buildings are very rare in the proposed district. Federal details are found in three East Main Street buildings: the dormers at 237 and 239 East Main and the delicate fanlight of 205. The latter, however, is more representative of Norristown's domestic Greek Revival, and more accurately could be considered a transition from the Federal style to the Greek Revival.

Greek Revival houses more or less form an arc around the Court House-public square area with a short tangent reaching along East Marshall Street on Sandy Hill. The major arc, about three blocks deep, extends eastwardly, westwardly, and northwardly
Local Greek Revival houses are characterized by trabeated windows, often with marble lintels, which occasionally are set off with bull’s eyes at their ends, as in the case of 205 East Main Street. Simple rectangular transoms and Greek Revival moldings, sometimes in the form of Ionic friezes beneath the transoms, also distinguish Greek Revival houses. In unusual, but pretentious, examples small rectangular sidelights frame the restrained frontispieces. A fine example of a Greek Revival townhouse is the William Jamison House at the southeast corner of DeKalb and Airy Streets. Added to the Greek Revival details of trabeated windows and entrances with their marble trim is the dentil frieze below the plain boxed cornice. The original small spindly balustrade near the center of the flat roof has been removed.

More modest examples of the Greek Revival style include the row houses in the 500-block of Cherry Street and both single and semi-detached dwellings in the 300 block of East Marshall Street. Some, like the houses at the end of the rows of the 500 block of Cherry Street and the 800 block of DeKalb Street or single dwellings like the one at 337 East Marshall Street, have double interior end chimneys connected by a brick screen. This feature became popular during the 1810’s and remained in vogue for nearly forty years. It dominates the 1849 Corson-Highly House at the northeast corner of Marshall and Violet Streets, the finest piece of Greek Revival architecture in the town. One of Sandy Hill’s mansions, the Corson-Highly House is a freestanding dwelling on an ample lot: its five-bay front is graced with an open Tuscan porch and a prominent frontispiece and sidelights.

Various expressions of the Renaissance Revival style, called Italianate in this nomination, grew in popularity after the middle of the 19th century. Italianate buildings can be found mixed in with Greek Revival examples, especially on Swede and DeKalb Streets, where a lot of demolition and new construction took place in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Beginning in the 900 block of both streets, north of Jacoby Street, however, the Italianate begins to dominate. The greatest concentration of the Italianate is on the 900 and 1000 blocks of DeKalb Street, but Italianate buildings are found on nearly all streets in the three-block arc that overlaps with the Greek Revival arc.

The Italianate ranges from fine villas like the one at 1040 DeKalb Street to semi-detached dwellings like those at 1013-1015 DeKalb Street and 351-353 East Marshall Street. The suburban villa at 1040 DeKalb street is characterized by its roughly cubical stuccoed form on which is displayed such Renaissance details as an overhanging flat roof with consoles, hood-moulds over the windows, quoins at the corners, and an open porch whose thin posts are enriched with horizontal moldings and chamfered edges. The semi-detached dwellings, on the other hand, are much more restrained. The primary features that distinguish them from the early Greek Revival rows and semi-detached houses are the heavier boxed cornices, often supported by consoles, and round-arch or segmental-arch entrances and window lintels. Also, the small basement windows usually are arched and treated as pairs in each bay.
Beyond the Italianate arc and reaching to the boundaries of the proposed district are the many styles of the High and Late Victorian periods. As in the case of the Italianate buildings, some Victorian styles can also be found within the Greek Revival arc, especially on DeKalb and Swede Streets. Because of the diversity of Victorian styles, very little concentration of a particular style can be found. Nevertheless, four Shingle Styles houses stand in the 900 block of Swede Street and a small number of modest Queen Anne examples are distributed along DeKalb Street, north of Spruce. The tendency, however, was to design buildings as unique structures such as the richly Beaux-Arts 1912 Norris apartment hotel at 611-613 Swede street and the many towered 1904 Eastwick Mansion at 1201 DeKalb Street in a vaguely French Gothic mode.

Examples of the range of Victorian styles can be found 16 years and six blocks apart on DeKalb Street: the 1893 McInnes House at No. 701 and the 1909 Anders-Rhoads House at Nos. 1337-1339. The McInnes House is representative of the taste for picturesque eclecticism in the last quarter of the 19th century. Its gable roofs and the large dormers and pyramidal roof with cross-stepped-gables give the house its irregular silhouette, and the random rock-faced shaped windows to lend a roughness and variety to the facades. While the stepped gables are Germanic Gothic in origin, the round arches are classical, resulting in eclecticism.

The Anders-Rhoads House, however, reflects the re-emergence of discipline, but the fascination for large scale of the early-20th-century late Victorian styles prevails. A double house, but on a greater scale than many earlier single dwellings, it is in the Georgian Revival Style. An Ionic portico with two pairs of columns and a bowed balcony dominates the Flemish-bond facade. Semi-hexagonal bays, large double dormers, aide porte-cochères, and an oversized fluted frontispiece indicate that the house is more Victorian than Georgian, but at least not eclectic.

The proposed boundaries of the Central Norristown Historic District are based primarily on the concepts of contiguous historical development and integrity of existing resources. To a lesser extent, they reflect important natural features: Stony Creek on the west, Sandy Hill on the east.

The District's southern limits are firmly defined by the railroad corridor which separates the District from the industrial complexes along the Schuylkill River. The railroad and the masonry retaining wall on Lafayette Street form an abrupt, seemingly impenetrable line and buffer to Norristown's traditionally heavy industrial area. The eastern and northern lines are based simply on the contiguity and integrity of the existing buildings. This integrity penetrates the Arch/Walnut Streets general boundary along Marshall, Airy and Moore Streets to form the base of the District's "L" shape. On the north, contiguity and integrity break down north of East Fornance Street at the Sacred Heart Hospital, a 1960's complex occupying a whole block. Historic maps and atlases reveal that this area of contiguous building very closely mimics the development limits of the 1902-1910 era. The effects of first the electric trolley and later the automobile are dramatically reflected at the District's northern and eastern boundaries as "leapfrog" development promoted a less contiguous development pattern, leaving many open areas for much later development.
10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 245

Quadrangle name Norristown, Pennsylvania

UTM References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Ray Ott, Martha Wolf, Richard Webster

organization Cee Jay Frederick Associates

date June 1984

street & number 29 South Walnut Street

telephone 215-431-7899

city or town West Chester

state Pennsylvania

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

_ _ national  _ _ state  _ _ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title

date

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration
9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 245
Quadrangle name Norristown, Pennsylvania
Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet

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State Historic Preservation Officer signature
Larry E. Tise, State Historic Preservation Officer
title date 9/28/84

For NPS use only
I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register
date

Keeper of the National Register
Attest:
Chief of Registration


Knipe, Irvin (Borough Solicitor), Norristown Borough Digest, Norristown Herald, 1904.


One Hundred Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Borough of Norristown, 1812-1937, Norristown, 1937.


Schmoyer, Richard H. (Borough Planner), Norristown High Speed Line Terminal (formerly the Philadelphia and Western Terminal or P & W), 1980.

Quad: Norristown, Pennsylvania 1966; revised 1973
Central Norristown Historic District
Montgomery County/Zone 18

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C E471309 N4440433
D E471928 N4440227
E E471907 N4440113
F E471175 N4439979
G E470660 N4440206