

Bricks & Mortar

New Construction—Nothing New Here

By Bill Double

The four buildings pictured here evoke memories of development efforts in their Rittenhouse Square neighborhood dating back to 1851: From left, The Harper (completed in 2019), 1920 Chestnut Street (1896), The Laurel (2022 projected), and The Republic (1929)



THE HARPER, a 24-story luxury apartment building, at 112 S. 19th Street, is named for James Harper, an early Rittenhouse Square developer and congressman. His four-story residence, with its distinctive white marble portico, was one of the earliest large houses on the Square, erected in 1840 at 1811 Walnut St.

Developed by Pearl Properties, The Harper rises on a site occupied by two historic structures in succession: the Aldine Hotel and later the Boyd Theatre. Listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, the Boyd, at 1910 Chestnut, opened in 1928, was the last survivor of the grand movie houses that once graced Center City Philadelphia.

Concert promoter Live Nation acquired the 2,400-seat Boyd (last known as the Sameric) in 2005 for \$13 million, intending to transform the movie house into an events venue. However, citing a lack of support from the city or state, Live Nation filed a “financial hardship” claim with the Philadelphia Historical Commission in 2014. The company asserted no feasible reuse for the Boyd existed.

Despite vigorous opposition from the Friends of the Boyd and fellow preservationists, the commission approved demolition of the theater. It protected only the Boyd’s Chestnut Street façade. So-called “façadectomies,” an uneasy compromise between developers and preservationists, are not uncommon in Philadelphia.

Amid much-touted plans to construct a modern multiplex on the site, Live Nation sold the theater to Pearl Properties for a reported \$4.5 million. Pearl already owned the properties between the Boyd and 19th Street, where it had planned to erect an apartment high-rise.

Acquisition of the Boyd site greatly enlarged the project’s footprint. The following year Pearl proposed an apartment tower stretching eastward to 19th and south to Sansom, subsuming the Boyd’s auditorium.

Pearl’s original plan called for a 32-story, 250-unit structure wrapped in red, white and gray panels, paralleling Chestnut Street. Neighbors voiced concerns regarding the building’s size and design. Rather than challenge the developer’s plan before city regulators, they took a novel approach. A “stakeholders” group, primarily representing nearby condo and apartment complexes, raised money to hire their own architect to propose design changes.

Led by Rick Gross (now CCRA President) and their architect Cecil Baker, the stakeholders collaborated with Pearl Properties to effect significant changes, including reducing the building’s height, changing its orientation, and relocating the ramp to its underground garage from Sansom to 20th Street.

As constructed, the Harper includes two stories of commercial space on its Sansom Street side. Pearl Properties also agreed to preserve the Boyd's Chestnut Street lobby for commercial use. This ornate appendage remains vacant, after a proposed "elegant Spanish restaurant" failed to materialize. A recent proposal would transform the space into a tech-based sports-entertainment center and restaurant.

The architectural gem known today as **1920 CHESTNUT** was erected in 1896 as an addition to a popular hotel of the era. Designed by Addison Hutton, "the Quaker architect," the 10-story Aldine Hotel western annex was the tallest building on its block when it opened. Rates for its 125 guest rooms ranged from \$3.50 to \$5 a night. Hutton's numerous local commissions include the former Philadelphia Savings Fund Society headquarters at 700 Walnut Street and the Arch Street Methodist Church at Broad and Arch.

The Aldine's main building, at 1910-1922 Chestnut, opened in 1877, but its origin can be traced back to 1851, when Dr. James Rush and his wife, Phoebe (née Ridgeway), moved into their new four-story brick mansion, complete with carriage house and stables, on the site.

An amateur architect and the seventh son of Dr. Benjamin Rush, noted physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, James designed his own house. He earned a medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania, and practiced medicine for a time. His attention later turned to research and writing.

The Philosophy of the Human Voice, his classic work published in 1827, offered a scientific notation system for describing speech sounds. He also served for a time as Treasurer of the United States Mint. Mrs. Rush, a prominent socialite and fashionista of her day, hailed from a New Jersey family of "unlimited means," as the *Philadelphia Times* observed.

After the Rushes' deaths, their mansion sat vacant before being sold at auction in 1875. The buyer, Philadelphia publisher Joshua B. Lippincott, converted the mansion into a hotel. He fully renovated the structure, adding four stories while retaining the Rushes' "pleasant rear gardens." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* placed the cost of his renovation at \$500,000 (\$13 million today). Following its opening in 1877, the Aldine soon became one of the city's premier hotels.

However, a critical flaw in Lippincott's splendid makeover gradually emerged. It seems that Dr. Rush's original support walls, which had been retained, proved too weak to sustain the weight of Lippincott's additional four stories. Over time the walls began to fail, necessitating a major renovation of the hotel, according to architect Hutton, who oversaw the project.

Completed in 1895, the rebuilt hotel sported a steel frame, a new "grand dining-room" and modern lighting, elevators and fire escapes. The hotel's inventory of 164 guest rooms increased to 289 with the completion of its 10-story addition the following year.

The original Aldine Hotel building was demolished c.1927, making way for construction of the Boyd Theatre. Unlike recent efforts to preserve its successor, there is no evidence of a campaign to "Save the Aldine." Surely, a few history buffs must have mourned the hotel's demise.

Today the Aldine's erstwhile west wing, 1920 Chestnut Street, houses high-end condominiums and the restaurant Veda at street level.

THE LAUREL, a 49-story residential tower at 1911 Walnut Street, is scheduled for completion in 2022. Curiously, this site on Rittenhouse Square, one of the city's most affluent residential areas, had remained vacant for some 20 years, save for a Pennsylvania Horticultural Society pop-up garden in 2012. The tortuous route to its redevelopment began in 1994 when a fire severely damaged structures, including the Eric Rittenhouse Theaters, in the 1900 block of Walnut.

Once the site was cleared, the Philadelphia Parking Authority (PPA) purchased and enlarged it by acquiring several adjacent Sansom Street properties, including the Rittenhouse Coffee Shop, the Warwick Apartments and the Oliver H. Bair Funeral Home, all designated as historically significant. However, the PPA, arguing that its project was in the public interest, won Historical Commission approval to demolish all three buildings. Residents of the apartments were given 30 days to vacate.

The PPA had big plans for the site: namely, a six-story, 500+-space parking facility, a new movie theater, a restaurant and shops. City leaders then tended to view increased parking as essential to economic growth.

Their enthusiasm for the project was not universal. "Why would anyone—particularly a public agency—do such a thing to one of the loveliest urban parks in America?" lamented the *Inquirer's* Inga Saffron.* Critics objected to the proposed demolition of the three historic Sansom Street buildings and the volume of traffic a massive carpark would invite. They contended that the site should be used to increase the area's residential density rather than to attract commuters.



The Boyd Theatre, 1908-1910 Chestnut St., opened on Christmas day 1928 with the feature film **Interference**, starring Eddie Cantor. (Courtesy of Irvin R. Glazer Theater Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia)

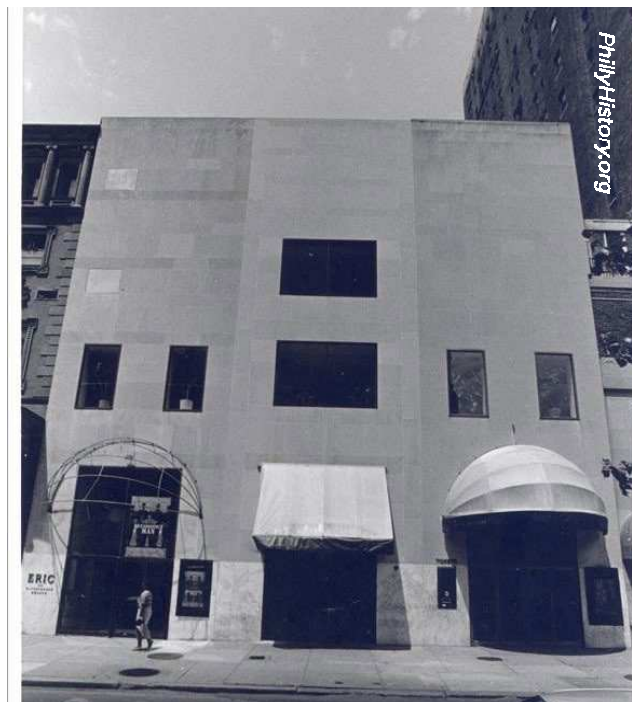
Common Pleas Court tossed a wrench into the PPA's plans in 2004. It ruled that demolition of the buildings, although approved by the Historical Commission, was "not in the public interest." Twenty-seven months later the PPA board voted to sell the site.

A sale was completed in 2007 to Castleway Properties of Ireland for \$36.7 million. However, that developer's proposal to construct a high-rise building on the site failed to materialize. In 2015 Nashville-based developer Southern Land Co. purchased the site for \$30 million. Southern Land proposed a 55-story residential building facing Walnut Street, with a two-story commercial structure along the Sansom Street side of the site.

Southern Land filed an "economic hardship" claim with the Historical Commission, asserting that preservation of the three protected Sansom Street properties was infeasible. The developer also entered into negotiations with the resident stakeholders' group described above. As a result, several modifications to the initial design were agreed upon: reducing the Laurel's height to 49 stories and size by 100 units; redesigning its three-story pedestal to harmonize with neighboring structures; reconfiguring its Walnut Street entrance; and moving its underground parking ramp from Sansom to Moravian.

Southern Land also pledged to preserve the Rittenhouse Coffee Shop and Warwick Apartments but not the funeral home. These structures would be restored to accommodate 35 units of affordable housing. Southern Land promised a \$2 million contribution to Project HOME to administer rental of these units. In return, the developer claimed a "density bonus" under city law.

Following its agreement with the stakeholders, Southern Land narrowed its "hardship" request to demolish the three Sansom Street properties, to include only the Oliver H. Bair Funeral Home. The Historical Commission approved this request. However, the commission approved the developer's subsequent request to also demolish the Rittenhouse Coffee Shop, with the proviso that its façade be reconstructed. Another façadectomy.



Eric Rittenhouse Square Theaters, 1907-1911 Walnut St., Present site of THE LAUREL.

The Laurel will contain 185 apartments and 64 condos, with prices starting at \$2.5 million, to \$25 million for a top-floor penthouse.

**Editor's note: CCRA was founded in 1947 initially to protest the proposed demolition of Rittenhouse Square for the installation of an underground parking garage. The more things change...*

THE REPUBLIC, at the southeast corner of 20th and Chestnut Streets, was constructed as the headquarters of the Aldine Trust Company. When erected in 1929, the 20-story tower was hailed as a symbol of the company's success. Aldine had prospered since its founding in 1906, absorbing two other trust companies along the way. The ground floor was reserved for banking, with professional offices above.

A special feature of the new headquarters, the *Inquirer* reported, was a lounge for its "feminine clients and their friends." The company would be relocating from 2020 Chestnut, dubbed the "mother of trust companies," which had earlier housed the Girard Trust Co. and other banks. Although the Aldine would be moving eastward, it proudly proclaimed itself a leader in the "trend westward." The Aldine assured depositors its new vault — "nearly a half million pounds of steel based on solid concrete"—was second to none in safety and efficiency.

Alas, this robust repository could not protect the bank's customers from impending disaster. The stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing dissolution of Bankers Trust Co. triggered a devastating "run" by Aldine Trust depositors. On December 9, 1930, the bank closed, pledging to fully reimburse all depositors. It is unclear if the bank ultimately honored that pledge.

The Aldine Trust Company itself was later absorbed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The building continued to house professional offices before being converted to apartments in 2003. Today, in addition to The Republic Apartments, it is home to Jane G's Dim Sum House.



THE ALDINE HOTEL.

*The Aldine Hotel and its recently completed 10-story annex—now known as 1920 Chestnut—in 1896. (From the **Guidebook to the principal places of interest in Philadelphia**, J.B. Lippincott, 1896, HathiTrust Digital Library)*

