



October 16, 2019

Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch Street, 13<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Dear Commissioners,

We recently received a notice that a former church building located on our school campus has been nominated by Ms. Celeste Morello for designation as an historic landmark and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia, the owner of the building in question, opposes this nomination.

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia purchased the former site of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church, including the church, the school building, the rectory, and the convent on July 27th, 2015. One year prior, Archbishop Charles Chaput issued a decree stating that the "Church building does not have any particular architectural, historical, or artistic significance" and would be relegated to secular use. He cited the tremendous expense of maintaining the church building and the expensive repairs required to keep the building operable. He noted that "the financial burden of repairing and maintaining" the church "would cause staffing and important programs, such as outreach to the poor and educational efforts, to suffer due to lack of funds." The Archdiocese of Philadelphia removed all relics and important religious items from the church, including the stained glass windows and all valued interior finishes, to prepare it for sale.

#### **Errors in the Nomination Materials**

The Nomination submitted by Ms. Morello contains three material errors with regard to the property.

First, she cites the property as being in "Good" condition. According to three sets of independent architects and construction managers, the existing structure is in "Very Poor" condition. There are major structural, mechanical and building system issues as well as a compromised building roof and building skin. The most notable deficiencies are:

- Deterioration of the interior structure of the belfry
- Failure of the stone façade to protect against water infiltration causing interior and exterior damage
- Failure of original copper flashings that are irreparable to their original state
- All original window stain glass and glazing has been removed and replaced with a Plexiglas treatment; this application is not permanent nor aesthetically pleasing. The existing window modifications have resulted in window frame deterioration and extensive water infiltration causing substantial interior damage.



- There are no working mechanical systems in the Church – the water has been terminated and all interior pipes have been looted, the heating system and its boilers have been dismantled and the electric service to the building has been terminated.
- There is substantial interior wall plaster deterioration as well as damaged interior plaster columns (please note that the interior columns are not marble or granite, but they are steel and plaster and have no significant architectural or historical value).
- The flooring in the entire building has been compromised, has deteriorated, or has buckled and is unrepairable and unusable.

Secondly, Ms. Morello lists the Church's occupancy status as "occupied." Due to the material deficits listed above, the church is currently unsafe for occupancy by our students and thus stands vacant, as it has for the past 7 years.

Thirdly, in the Nomination, Ms. Morello cites the date of construction from 1887-1890. She fails to note the material alterations that subsequently occurred to the exterior of the property prior to Boys' Latin's purchase of the building. This omission is of critical importance. In fact, three of the defining features of the original building noted in the Description section on page 4 of the nomination materials are absent from the structure.

- 1) The distinctive red tiling of the upper story was removed by the Archdiocese in 1951 and replaced with ahistoric wooden siding.
- 2) The 122 foot belfry spire along with the top 40 feet of stone were removed by the Archdiocese in 1951.
- 3) The rose window (and all original stained glass) was replaced by the Archdiocese with Plexiglas in 2014.

These defining elements of the structure designed by Watson in his Richardsonian Romanesque inspiration have been absent for as many as 68 years. Furthermore, the original slate roof tile has been removed and replaced with an inexpensive asphalt roof shingle. The church building that stands today is materially different than the structure designed and built 132 years ago and thus does not meet the Philadelphia Historical Commission's "(c)" criteria for designation of reflecting the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style.

### **Burden of Designation for Boys' Latin of Philadelphia**

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia purchased the former site of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church (including the church, the school building, the rectory, and the convent) to create a school campus to serve as home to our 375 middle school students. Roughly 85% of our students come from the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the school. The school building has functioned wonderfully, creating a joyful place of learning literature, math, science, social studies, and Latin. We have renovated the interior of the convent to serve as offices for school leaders. The former rectory now serves as our Fine Arts Building, housing our visual arts and music programming. There are two ongoing deficits of our middle school facilities that hinder us from fully meeting our students' needs: a place for gathering our full school community as well as providing a space for our Physical Education programming which currently occurs in our small parking lot, weather-permitting. From



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the outset of our acquisition of this property, our plan has involved renovating the Church building to meet these needs by creating a multi-purpose space / gymnasium. Initial estimates for the renovation were just over \$3.5 million; the project was put on hold while the school evaluates its fundraising and financing capacity.

As a public charter school, we receive only about 90% of our operating budget from public funding and the rest of our revenue is derived from our fundraising efforts. All capital projects are funded by contribution income from our donors. Adhering to historic preservation standards and engaging with architects who specialize in preservation would be extremely burdensome financially. Several designers and builders said that it would increase our project cost by as much as 50-125%. This sort of cost increase would be disastrous to the school, at best delaying the initiative by several more years and at worst rendering it prohibitively expensive and therefore unfeasible. This would be a catastrophic loss for our school and community while not contributing in a meaningful way to the historical or architectural fabric of the church building's surroundings or neighborhood.

#### **Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Middle School as a valued physical hub in our community**

The nominator, Ms. Celeste Morello, resides seven miles away from the building she nominated for preservation. She created this nomination without input from the owner, Boys' Latin of Philadelphia, or members of the community surrounding the school. For years, our school neighbors have lived beside a blighted, vacant church standing unsightly on a prominent corner in the neighborhood.

In Ms. Morello's nomination materials, she included a newspaper article published exactly 132 years ago (a remarkable coincidence!) on October 16, 1887. The article depicts a beautiful scene of 4,000 community members gathered on the corner of 63<sup>rd</sup> and Callowhill, excited to celebrate the laying of the cornerstone of what would become the functional centerpiece of the parish and the Haddington neighborhood. We at Boys' Latin envision the same sort of joyful celebration occurring when we redesign and rebuild what is now an unsightly, vacant church into a lively, functional space for our students and the community at large to enjoy. It is critical for our school to be able to maintain design and budget flexibility in the creation of this space. As such, we strongly oppose the nomination for inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

At our hearing on November 13th, you will hear from the school community members and stakeholders who would be negatively affected by designating the Church building as a historic landmark. You will hear from Councilman Curtis Jones, who encouraged Boys' Latin to purchase this site and become a much-needed caretaker of a formerly vacant property and an educational beacon on 63<sup>rd</sup> and Callowhill. You will hear from our students and parents, who dream of the day they will be able to conduct their physical education classes in a safe, indoor gymnasium or multi-purpose space as opposed to in the small school parking lot. You will hear from our neighbors, who share in our vision of replacing a blighted old church with a vibrant community center. You will hear from our middle school principal, who values the creation of a safe place to congregate the full student body for assemblies and special events. It is the position of the property owner and the

*Every man is the architect of his own fortune.*



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stakeholders listed above that designation as a historic landmark would be a hindrance to the school's mission: sending more young men of color to college than any school in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

In closing, we ask that you consider the lack of meaningful contribution this building has to offers as a landmark and celebrate with us the importance of a functional educational hub, with great service to the community. Again, we implore the commissioners to vote "no" and deny the nomination submitted by Ms. Morello.

Sincerely,

Kerry Wagner Woodward, Chief Operating Officer  
Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School

#### **About Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School**

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia is a Title I college-preparatory school and the only all-boys public school in Pennsylvania. Founded in 2007 to address the extreme dearth of quality educational opportunities for students in Philadelphia, Boys' Latin is dedicated to the development of confident and independent learners who will be actively engaged as global citizens in our interdependent world. As a public charter school, there are no admissions requirements and the school enrolls by randomized lottery. As the only school of its kind in Philadelphia, Boys' Latin is a leader in educating urban boys. Our students matriculate into, persist through, and graduate from college at rates that far surpass city and national averages. Boys' Latin alumni now live, work, and lead positive change in Philadelphia and other cities across the country.