



CHAPTER



INTRODUCTION

Visitors and residents alike sense that the West Chester Historic District is a unique place. Densely grouped three-story buildings laid out in a rectangular pattern of streets form the singular character of this 200 year-old settlement. The architectural character of buildings in the Historic District is remarkably consistent, built in a row-form building pattern with the front facade on the sidewalk line, predominantly constructed of brick, with a first-floor storefront and storefront cornice, topped by two residential or office floors, and capped by a building cornice (Figure 1). This consistent building formula and urban form repeats block after block within the Historic District, creating a cohesive and unified streetscape in which individual building design is secondary to the overall quality of the district (Figure 2). This cohesive environment is punctuated by a small group of monumental buildings along High Street – the 1846 Chester County Courthouse and the temple-form bank buildings which face the Courthouse across the street (Figures 3 and 4). Two large office buildings also lie within the Historic District, the six-story 1907 Farmers and Mechanics (F&M) Building, whose overall size is masked by its placement downhill from the Courthouse, and the 1966 Courthouse North Wing, a modern County office building which, aside from its intrusive height, is a recessive, background building.



To preserve and protect the borough’s historical and architectural resources, West Chester Borough Council created the West Chester Historic District through the 1988 enactment of a Historic District Zoning Ordinance, pursuant to state enabling legislation, the Historic District Act (1961). Consistent with the Historic District Act, the Ordinance contains provisions for regulating alterations, additions, new construction, and the demolition of buildings within the District. The Historic District is an overlay to various underlying districts shown on the zoning map (Figure 5). The Ordinance establishes a Historical and Architectural Review Board (“HARB”) which reviews applications for exterior alterations, new construction, demolition, and sign permits within the Historic District, and makes recommendations to Borough Council for the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness for each application.



Figure 1. The northeast corner of Market and Church Streets, 2002. The architectural character of the West Chester Historic District is remarkably consistent. Solid blocks of row-form buildings predominantly constructed of brick, with a first-floor storefront and storefront cornice, topped by two floors of residential or office use, and capped by a wood building cornice.



Figure 2. Looking east on Gay Street from Church Street, 1899. The Historic District retains the nineteenth-century scale depicted in this view. (From the collection of the Chester County Historical Society.)

Intent of the Design Guidelines

The *Design Guidelines for the West Chester Historic District* are intended to be used as a community tool to assist property owners and HARB members in an informed cooperative effort to protect the historical character of downtown West Chester. The guidelines provide an analysis of what is special about the Historic District and offer specific direction toward enhancing and preserving those qualities. The *Design Guidelines* may also be used as a technical resource for property owners outside of the Historic District.

Understanding the historical development of West Chester is essential for the thoughtful application of *Design Guidelines* to the Historic District. The chapter on historical and architectural heritage is intended to provide the required background and insight into the town plan, the architecture, building sizes and uses, and the character of streetscapes. The chapter on qualities of historic architecture defines the principles and qualities of historic architecture that will be considered in the HARB’s evaluation of proposed alterations. Finally, the *Design Guidelines* provide specific direction for the treatment of existing buildings and guidelines for compatible new design in the Historic District.

This document is a set of guidelines and shall not exclude designs deemed appropriate by the HARB and/or Borough Council. This document is not meant to be used as a strict and rigid rule book. Article XI of the West Chester Zoning Code will continue to be the legal basis for design review within the Historic District (See Appendix C). Pursuant to Section 112-60.E of the Zoning Code, the HARB may issue design guidelines “for construction in the Historic District...to further the description of exterior architectural design criteria.” Pursuant to the Ordinance, the Borough



Figure 3. Chester County Courthouse, the architectural centerpiece of West Chester, was designed by Philadelphia architect Thomas U. Walter in the Greek Revival Style, and completed in 1847. (From the collection of the Chester County Historical Society.)

Council unanimously approved the *Design Guidelines* by resolution at its June 2002 meeting.

The *Design Guidelines* are a flexible tool for ensuring the preservation of the architectural character of the Historic District. To achieve this goal, the guidelines strive to meet the following objectives:

- To assist property owners in planning for the acquisition and alteration of properties within the Historic District by being more specific than the ordinance.
- To provide applicants with the criteria that HARB follows in rendering its decisions.
- To minimize decisions based on individual tastes or arbitrary preferences.
- To ensure the consistency of the HARB in its review of applications.
- To augment the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.



Figure 4. Views of the First Bank of Chester County (left) and First National Bank (right), 2002. The First Bank of Chester County was designed by Thomas U. Walter and completed in 1837, eleven years before the completion of the Courthouse. The First Bank of Chester County was designed in the Greek Revival Style while the First National Bank is a Neoclassical style building, constructed in 1912.

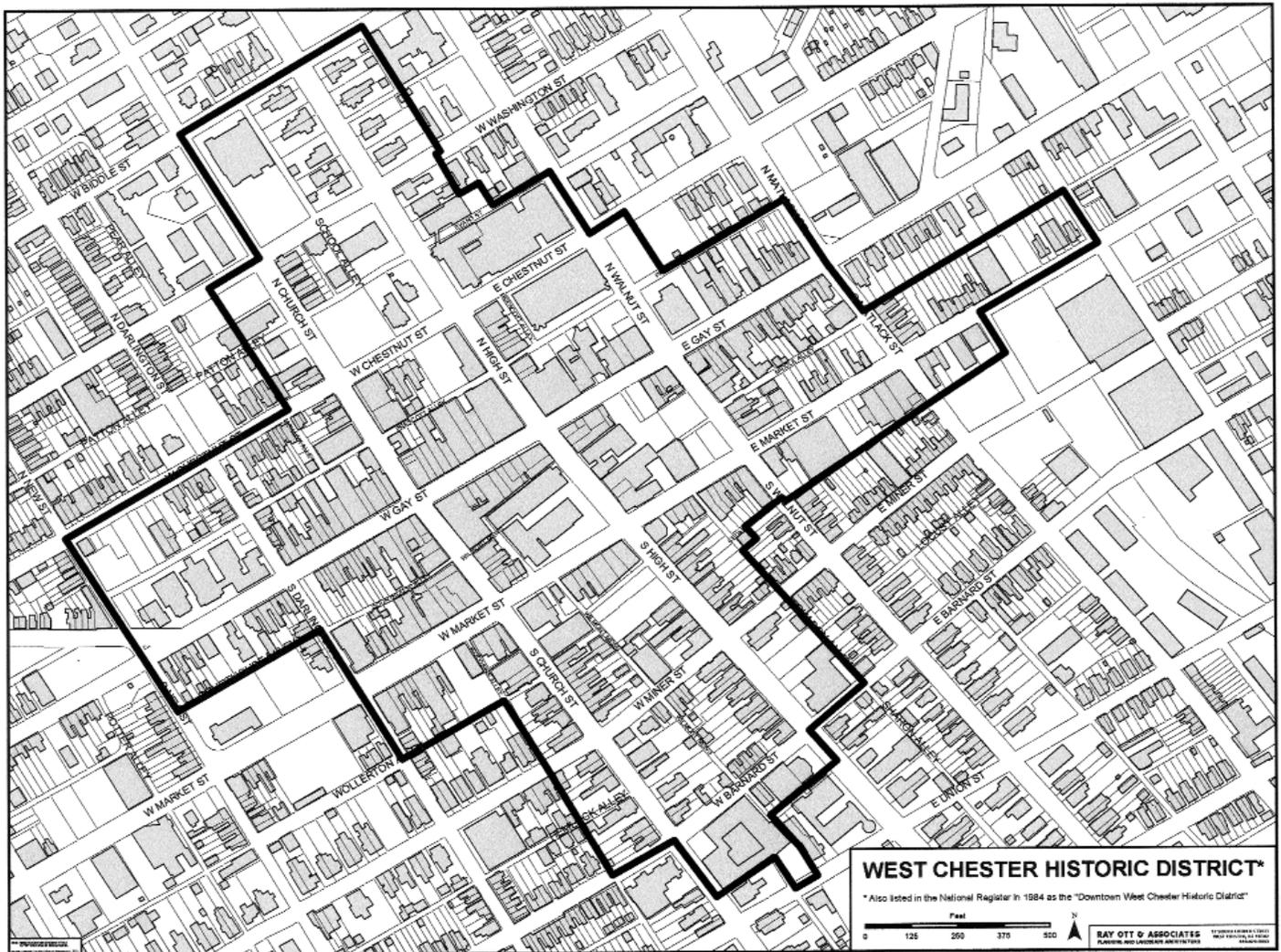


Figure 5. Map of the West Chester Historic District (courtesy of Ray Ott and Associates).

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