Self-interview by Walter M. Phillips
on the subject of his role and observations relating to
mid-century Philadelphia government

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1. How did you become so interested in the city affairs of Philadelphia?

I was brought up in what was then a quite rural section of the city with a village community known as Torresdale. The heart of Torresdale was a village, but going out in different directions from the village were a number of quite diverse communities, one very well-to-do, another quite well-to-do, and about three others shading down to a very poor community known as Pleasant Hill. There were several churches in the Torresdale area and a fairly strong civic association. My family had been associated with this community for five generations ahead of me and were deeply rooted in the Episcopal church. I was drawn into church activities, the boy scouts, and finally the Torresdale civic association, being made Chairman of the Welfare Committee of the Association. By then I was a junior at Princeton University, coming home most weekends for social and civic activities.

At that juncture I was named Chairman of the Welfare Committee of the Torresdale Civic Association. It was at the height of the Depression and the focus of interest of the Association was on a community known as Pleasant Hill, which was a community started about 1920 as a group of summer bungalows. These had been converted to year-round living, ill-equipped though they were for such use. Practically all of the inhabitants of that area, about 65 or 70 families, were on relief. It was essentially a rural slum. None of the side streets were paved. They were all full of pot holes. There were no water or sewer mains, the people being dependent on wells and cess-pools.

Although there was some private charity from other parts of Torresdale which funnelled into Pleasant Hill, it was not enough, and besides, some of the problems were of the nature that private could not cope. There were a lot of vacant lots, mostly strewn with debris. There were several unsavory saloons and there was quite a little crime. Most of the houses were heated by coal stoves standing in the main room of the bungalow. The overcrowding in the houses was severe, as the neighborhood was largely overrun with children. The nationality was nearly all American stock, but mostly down and out people, who had difficulty holding jobs.

It was a tough assignment, and I floundered around in search of things which could be done to help the people in that neighborhood and to improve its environment. I went to see Miss Constance Biddle, who was the head of the Family Welfare Society in Philadelphia. She was very pleased to see a young man tackling such problems. With her help and with some money I was able to solicit from the well-to-do families in Torresdale, the Society placed a social worker on the job, helping wherever possible the families which most needed it. And taking a long-range point-of-view I went to
see Mrs. George A. Dunning, who was President of the Birth Control League in Philadelphia. Some money was needed to promote that cause, so I collected a few hundred dollars from Torresdale residents who were interested and could afford to contribute. In order to upgrade the activities of the boys in the Pleasant Hill neighborhood, some of whom were very tough and constantly getting into trouble, I brought together some young men of Torresdale, including a few from Pleasant Hill itself to start a Boy Scout troop, separate and apart from the Torresdale troop which would not have absorbed very well the toughies from Pleasant Hill.

I discovered a number of city agencies which could be helpful, particularly the Division of Housing and Sanitation of the city's Department of Public Health. The Chief of that division was Herbert M. Packer. His division was able to force the cleaning up of vacant lots and to acquire certain landlords to make improvements to houses in violation of the housing code. Even the city Streets Department was brought into the act to the extent of filling in some of the big holes which had developed over the years in the cinder and gravel streets of Pleasant Hill.

My experience as Chairman of the Welfare Committee of the Torresdale Civic Association during my junior year at Princeton led me to the idea of writing my senior thesis at Princeton about the city government of Philadelphia, and since I was majoring in economics, I chose the subject of the finances of the City of Philadelphia. In the second half to my last semester at Princeton I spent about two days a week in Philadelphia researching my subject — sometimes in City Hall, but mostly in the library of the private institution known as the Bureau of Municipal Research of Philadelphia.

It's been a long answer to a simple question, but I think it does explain my orientation towards Philadelphia government.

I should perhaps add that while I was at Princeton I took a course in municipal government given by Harold Dodds, then President of the university. Municipal government had been his field of teaching, and he still carried one course while I was there. At Harvard Law School I also took the only course on municipal law given by a professor, curiously, named Dodd.

To the question of what prompted me to organize the city policy committee, which I did in the year 1940, the first answer is that I had a natural interest in that direction resulting from my Torresdale experience and my studies at Princeton and at Harvard Law School. However, circumstances projected me into city affairs much sooner than one might have expected. Governor Earl had appointed a commission to rewrite the city charter of Philadelphia. In those days there was no home rule. Municipal charters were granted by the legislature and signed by the governor. The draft of legislation to be produced by the Governor's Commission had to be submitted to
the legislature. It was a good commission that drafted the proposed charter, the commission being chaired by a respected businessman in Philadelphia named Thomas Evans. He was a democrat. In addition, a citizen’s committee had been formed to give public backing to the charter drafted by the Evans commission. That citizen’s committee was chaired by Thomas Raeburn White, a republican. Governor Earl and Thomas Evans were both democrats.

The proposed charter called for a city manager plan of government and a city council elected by proportional representation. It provided for a city planning commission which was charged with preparing a capital program projecting six years ahead and a capital budget for the immediate year ahead. It tightened up on civil service provisions and provided for a more logical arrangement of departments in the city government. It was a city charter bill which provided for the form of city government highly sanctioned by scholars in that field, such as President Dodds and Professor Dodd.

About the end of June 1938 I took my Pennsylvania Bar Examination and then vacationed for the summer at Cape Cod. In early September, I believe, I received word that I had failed the exam. The cram course I took notwithstanding.

When Mary and I returned to Philadelphia in early September, I volunteered to work in the office of the City Charter committee which was promoting support for the new charter drafted by the Evans commission. It would not be possible to take the bar exam again until after the first of the year. I was given the title of Research Director and the assignment of putting out public information in support of the provisions of the proposed new city charter. This I enjoyed doing and was able to enlist 6 or 8 other persons in the undertaking, several of whom were young lawyers not very busy with their practice in those Depression years and two or three of whom were PhD’s in government and political science. The public media, especially the newspapers, publicized the proposed city charter widely and a public poll showed, I believe, a good majority in favor of it, but in the end, the Republican regime in Philadelphia which controlled City Hall offices was successful in blocking the charter from being passed by the legislature.

When the charter campaign was over and I had finally passed the bar exams, I took a job as law clerk to Judge George Gowen Parry of Common Pleas Court number 1. Judge Parry did not have enough work to keep a law clerk busy, so I had time and energy to pursue ideas for furthering good government in Philadelphia despite the failure of the 1938 charter movement. I talked with a lot of people -- gathered a few people around me at lunchtimes to consider various approaches toward better government, became acquainted with some civic bodies and in particular the Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs. I had gotten to know quite a few of their members through my activities at the City Charter committee. They would ask me now and then to attend their weekly luncheons at which they would have a speaker on one or another aspect of city government, then ask the speaker questions and indulge in a general discussion.
I was quite taken by the idea of such a luncheon group, but thought that the Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs was too passive, that it did not take strong positions or campaign for any of the principles they stood for. Also, the members were getting old, there were no women in the group, and also there were no Negroes. Too many of them were lawyers* however, the format was basically good. The idea struck me that it would be a smart move to organize a younger luncheon group which would avoid those deficiencies and have a more active program. I then talked to a few friends about the idea, starting with those who had been working with me at the City Charter Committee. The more people I talked to the better the idea seemed to become and the more I came across people who would be interested in the new group. As I recall, I took great advantage of the fact that Judge Parry gave me so little work to do. I was able to go very carefully into all the perspective members for the new group to be formed. I met them at luncheons and dinners in order to get well-acquainted and to ascertain their specific interest in government.

Finally, I had, I think, a small convening committee which invited the chosen people to dinner one night at the Princeton Club, using the very room in which the Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs regularly met. We asked Hugh Scott, who had been one of the founders of the Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs, to be our special guest and to tell us the story of the Philadelphia Committee. I believe we limited ourselves to 40 members, that they all came that first night and that Hugh Scott gave a very good talk. I had so immersed myself in this project that I was able to introduce everybody in the room without using any notes and without making any mistakes. I proposed the name City Policy Committee, having pulled it out of the air, and it was accepted.

We decided to meet twice a month, once at lunchtime and once in the evening. We wanted to have working committees, which the Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs did not have. The idea was that the committees would meet the weeks when the committee as a whole was not meeting. I proposed that city planning be the number one theme of interest in the first year, feeling that it would be non-controversial and I suggested public housing as the number 2 theme of interest. It had been my observation that the Philadelphia Committee on Public Affairs lacked any focus, its programs being scattered over a range of subjects. Our new group agreed to this format and I induced Edmund Bacon to be Chairman of the Planning Committee and Vice Chairman of the entire City Policy Committee.

Although we had sub-committees on about a dozen sub-topics relating to city affairs, our two main areas of interest were city planning and housing for low-income families. We had strong sub-committees working on those subjects and preparing position papers for the City Policy Committee to adopt. After a couple of orientation meetings of the new group, the City Policy Committee invited Edward Hopkinson, Jr., the senior partner of the prestigious investment firm of Drexel and Co. to be its speaker. Hopkinson was then a director of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company, which owned and operated the entire subway and trolley line system of the city. I believe that at that stage of investment banking history...
in the United States, Drexel and Co. was still a part of J. P. Morgan & Co. of New York City. The Depression had caused the PRT to go into bankruptcy. It had just been reorganized under the bankruptcy laws as the PTC (Philadelphia Transit Co.).

This early contact with Hopkinson was very helpful to me and our group a couple of years later when we were fighting for the passage by City Council of the ordinance to establish a new City Planning Commission. We had earned his respect by being interested and relatively informed on an economic matter of considerable importance to the city, namely, the functioning of its transit system as a part of the free enterprise economy.

Others who spoke to us were Dorothy Schoel, now Mrs. Newcomb Montgomery. She was then Research Director of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, having before that been one of the two prime leaders in lobbying for the enactment of the United States Housing Act, under which the Public Housing Program of the United States had been carried on. She was the first member of our group to give a talk to it.

Another good program was having as a speaker a man named T. Henry Walnut. He had been Chairman of a citizens committee to fight against the 1938 proposed City Charter. But he had been a reformer in the days of Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose third party effort in 1912. He was asked to speak to the City Policy Committee because he had been appointed, no doubt by Mayor Lamberton, to be a member of Philadelphia's Civil Service Commission. The final meeting of the season, held on May 28, had as its speaker Lawrence Orton, a member of the New York City Planning Commission. Our group by then had concluded that it wished to make its major theme that of City Planning. While working with the City Charter Committee of 1938, I had organized several sizeable luncheons to hear special speakers on subjects of city government where important changes were in store should the proposed charter be enacted. One of these affairs was a luncheon for Norton, so I suggested we have him come and discuss with the City Policy Committee the entire subject of city planning, how it has been handled in New York and what he might suggest for Philadelphia.

After an adjournment for the summer we opened a fall series of meetings, with Mayor of Philadelphia as our first speaker — Mayor Robert E. Lamberton. We entitled it "The Mayor's Program."

The bi-monthly programs of the committee of the whole were held at a restaurant on Locust Street between 16th and 17th Sts. on the North Side called the Quaker Lady. It had a dining room in the rear that could seat our group, which usually amounted to about 35 or 40 people out of the total membership of about 65 or 70.

No one was invited to be a member of the City Policy Committee unless he had proven his or her ability in one way or another in the realm of civic, political, or charitable affairs. We would alternate our two monthly meetings between lunch and dinner, the dinner meeting being important because certain leaders working on the periphery of the city could not get to town easily for a long luncheon.
The sophisticated format of the City Policy Committee involved too much overhead time of the leadership members, there being no paid staff or anyone who could give it substantial time. The result was that after the first year, which was a rapid fire one of getting into many subjects, the program was narrowed and the number of public actions taken greatly reduced. One year of the Chairmanship was all that I could stand and still hold onto my job as a young lawyer in the firm of Krusen, Evans, and Shaw. I therefore sought a successor in John W. Bodine, a brilliant young lawyer who had studied law at Oxford, England and promptly had taken his law exams in Pennsylvania, passing the exams on first crack. He was associated with the firm of Drinker, Biddle, and Reath. I had gotten to know him when I did my six months apprentice at the law in that firm and under Mr. Charles Biddle as my preceptor. Bodine was a young man in the firm specializing in tax law, but interested in many subjects. One of his major interests was cooperative grocery stores, and he was President of an association of cooperative grocery stores. It was a movement which I think was generated by the great Depression of the 1930's, where everybody was penny-pinching. I can't recall whether John resigned from his role in regard to the cooperatives or whether he simply added the City Policy Committee to his list of extra-curricular activities.

John made a good Chairman of the meetings, but he couldn't give enough time to spur the complicated system of committees which we had operating during my period as Chairman.

Gradually, the City Policy Committee became more like the Philadelphia Committee of Public Affairs, the luncheon meetings being the principal activity, and finally, in the mid-50's the two organizations — the Philadelphia Committee of Public Affairs and the City Policy Committee — merged. The City Policy Committee had corralled all the interesting younger people, so there was no other course left to the Philadelphia Committee of Public Affairs. The Chairman of the City Policy Committee at the time of the merger was Bennet Schauffler, the oldest member of the City Policy Committee when it was founded. His professional field was labor relations and he was the regional director of the National Labor Relations board. It was just his dish of tea to bring people together. But I was somewhat sad about it because it inevitably spelled a major diminution of civic action.

Returning to the main theme of the City Policy Committee, that of city planning, a significant development occurred when the idea was made to take active civic steps toward the goal of activating a city planning process within the Philadelphia city government. To do that it was felt that the City Policy Committee needed a broader base of support. It evoked the Junior Chamber of Commerce for its position of acceptance in the community and its eagerness to carry-out civic projects. The idea arose of joining forces with the Junior Chamber and it was decided also to bring in on equal footing a third organization called the Lawyer's Council on Civic Affairs. The latter had been organized about the same time as the City Policy Committee was being put together. This was done by Henry Beerits. He had attended Princeton University and was in the class ahead of me. He also, I believe, had been
enrolled in the special program of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He had also finished Harvard Law School one year ahead of me. He had been brought up in Somerset County in Southwestern Pennsylvania, but upon finishing his bar examinations in Philadelphia he decided to stay and practice law here. In fact, he took a position with the law firm of Krusen, Evans, and Shaw. It was he who about a year later drew me into that firm as well.

A serious problem in organizing the City Policy Committee was that there were many public-spirited young lawyers whose time was not fully engaged in those still lingering depression years. Henry and I discussed the question of how many lawyers we could afford to have in the City Policy Committee without that group of people dominating the organization. In our conversation we struck on the idea that there could be a special and separate organization focusing on city affairs but comprised entirely of young lawyers. It occurred to us that Henry might organize such a body while I was putting together the City Policy Committee. He called his group the Lawyer's Council on Public Affairs and selected a dozen or so able young men of different law firms in the city.

When it was decided to broaden the base of the effort in regard to city planning, it was natural to turn to the Lawyer's Council on Civic Affairs and to the Philadelphia Junior Chamber of Commerce. All three bodies represented a new generation of persons working in Center City and interested in the future of the city.

Each of the three parent organizations decided to delegate three of their members to a joint committee which was given the title Joint Committee on City Planning. The Chairman of the joint Committee was drawn from the Lawyer's Council on Civic Affairs, a young man named Frank Awalther. As a lawyer, he was employed by the Receivers, or Trustees in Bankruptcy, I'm not sure which official category they fell into, who were liquidating the Philadelphia Company for Guaranteeing Mortgages. It had gone into bankruptcy during the Depression, when the mortgages it held on Philadelphia office buildings and hotels were defaulted on by the mortgagors. I had known Frank socially in earlier years and as I recall, he went to Yale as an undergraduate and to the University of Pennsylvania for his law degree. Frank did an excellent job as Chairman of the Joint Committee on City Planning. He held weekly lunches, as I recall, inviting to his committee, seriatim, all of the people they could find who might have information or advice that would be helpful in devising the most appropriate set-up for city planning in Philadelphia and intending support for the proposal the committee aimed to present to the city fathers.

Walther wrote marvelous minutes of all those meetings of his committee, but unfortunately they were somehow lost and never turned up for all these years. However, a report prepared from them and a copy of that I do have. It is entitled Report on the Suggested Organization of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission Prepared for Hon. Robert E. Lamberton, Mayor of Philadelphia by the Joint Committee on City Planning (City Policy Committee? Junior Board of Commerce; and the Lawyer's Council on Civic Affairs.)
It was dated August 15, 1941.

The recommendations were very practical in that they included only those actions which were possible under existing law, namely, Philadelphia 1919 City Charter. The charter had a provision authorizing the establishment of the city planning commission, but that provision had never been adequately implemented.

The report of the Joint Committee detailed specific actions which a City Planning Commission should undertake.
The situation in Philadelphia as to city planning was a muddled one at the close of the fourth decade of the 20th century. Although the 1919 city charter provided for a city planning commission, that provision had never been implemented. As I recall, extensive public works had been carried out in the 1920's under the planning and direction of the city's department of public works, the planning being done by the Bureau of Surveys and Zoning of that department. Early in that decade was built the Roosevelt Blvd. and in the latter part of that decade was built the Broad St. subway. Various lesser projects were carried out, such as the Henry Ave. bridge over the Wissahickon gorge and the construction of the Delaware River bridge, since renamed as the Benjamin Franklin bridge. That project was carried out by a joint commission set up by the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, but Philadelphia contributed, as I recall, 10 million dollars.

The decade in the 1920's was the period in which the automobile came into its own. It became a vehicle for travelling to and from work, a way for salesmen to get around, and a device in the form of small trucks for all kinds of stores to make home deliveries. To accommodate the automobiles and trucks many streets had to be improved with appropriate paving and some had to be widened to carry the traffic. Several new arteries were projected and construction started such as Arrowmingo Ave. toward the Northeast, Henry Ave. toward the Northwest and an improved Broad St. to serve both the South and the North segments of Philadelphia.

The most ambitious public works started at that time were the Locust St. subway, the construction of a tunnel under the Schuylkill River at Market St. to carry the Market St. subway on out Market St. into West Philadelphia in place of the old elevated structure which carried the trains from the east to the west as they came out of the subway on a steep grade, twisting at the top onto the tracks of the west Philadelphia elevated. The Locust St. subway was dug but not equipped.

About 10 million dollars was squandered on the sesquisentennial. All of these undertakings were financed by longterm bonds.

The decade of the 1920's saw the final development of West Philadelphia, all of the open land still there being developed with row housing and local shops.

In Northeast Philadelphia there was a great extension of row housing, reaching out to Cottman St. and in some places beyond that. This brought conversion of what was open farm country into blocks and blocks of row houses. It is to the
credit of the city fathers of that time that they financed the acquisition of lands along the Pennypack Creek, creating another beautiful park winding through the wooded section of the Pennypack valley and creating a facility for the Northeast to the Wissahickon Park along that stream and valley in the Northwest part of Philadelphia. It may have been at that time, also, that Cobb's Creek park was acquired and preserved.

Thus, it cannot be said that the capital funds of the city were squandered in the 1920's. Many significant improvements were made and new assets to the city acquired.

In those days there was no Council of Economic Advisors such as we have today. The great Depression of the 1930's was not foreseen, nor was there any governmental machinery at-the national, state, or city level to cope with an adverse economy. As businesses slowed down and employment dwindled, debts accumulated and many taxes went unpaid. The purchasing power of the dollar actually went up, but the amount of dollars in the hands of the public obviously went way down. Delinquency in the payment of real estate taxes to the city of Philadelphia rose very steeply. The city was unable to pay all its bills. It quickly used up all its emergency borrowing capacity, and because of its expensive capital improvements during the 1920's paid for by the issuance of longterm, quite high interest rate bonds, it no longer had any borrowing capacity under the strict limit provided in the Pennsylvania State constitution as to cities of the first class. Although Philadelphia was the only city of the first class, it would be necessary to obtain a state-wide vote of the Pennsylvania electorate to alter that debt limit. Even if it had been altered, chances are that the city's credit was so poor that it could not borrow further at any tolerable interest rate.

It was a vicious circle as there became less and less money to run the city and make improvements there was less and less money being paid out in wages and for the purchase of goods and services.

As the depression deepened and a new administration came into power in Washington under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, quite a few measures for coping with the Depression were adopted, but the economy was slow in responding and the city, like its inhabitants, suffered through very hard times for almost the whole decade of the 1930's.

Philadelphia perhaps suffered more than any city in the country as a result of its very deeply rooted commitment to the Republican party. Federal money for public improvements funneling from Washington, D.C. to the distressed cities of the nation for the purpose of financing public works which would both give jobs to workers and stimulate purchasing power flowed very haltingly to this city.
One public housing project was constructed at Crescentville, not far from Sears Roebuck on the Boulevard. It was designed by Walter Thomas, the architect who served as the Secretary of the City Planning Commission, of which Joseph E. Widener was Chairman. Mr. Widener was an extremely wealthy man who lived on a very large estate just outside the Northwest limits of the city, in Whitemarsh township. He was primarily a sportsman, having a large stable of race horses, and spending a large part of his winter in Florida at the race tracks there.

The Vice Chairman of the Commission was a prominent Center City realtor, Joseph J. Greenberg. The Secretary was Walter H. Thomas.

Apparently the city appropriated no funds to the City Planning Commission, but I have not checked that out. However, during the Depression, or at least the late years of the Depression, money was made available by the New Deal agency known as the W. P. A., the full title of which was Works Progress Administration. With those funds, Walter Thomas, a secretary of the City Planning Commission, hired quite a few people, spending well over a million dollars, as I recall, and collected quite massive data about the physical condition of the city. For example, otherwise unemployed architects were put to work gathering detailed plans and information about the old section of the city which in Colonial times was known as Society Hill, the area near the Delaware River just west of the port facilities and south of Market, I believe, to about Lombard Street. Sidney Martian, who was a partner in architecture with Walter Thomas, told me about this activity one day at the Rittenhouse Club when I had first joined that club just prior to World War II. He told me that the old Phillips mansion on the West side of Front St. south of Pine, as I recall, had been so studied. My immediate family being quite ignorant about family history, I didn’t know what he was talking about. I did not quite believe him and never bothered to look into the matter. Since then, however, I have come across a picture taken, apparently, by the WPA of the beautiful and graceful curving stairway from the first floor to the second floor, showing that the first floor had a very high ceiling. Unfortunately, that house was torn down at the time of the general restoration work in Society Hill. My friend, John P. Robin, a Pittsburgher who had become Secretary of Commerce for Pennsylvania and then brought to Philadelphia by Albert Greenfield, I believe, to be the Executive Head of the Old Philadelphia Development Corporation mentioned to me one day when I happened to be in his office on another matter, that they had just torn down an old house on Front Street which was said to have been built by a man named Phillips. It was considered too far south to be included in the redevelopment plans. Even if I had known in time, I doubt if I would have attempted to do anything about the
old house because it faced some warehouses and industrial type of activity which would have made it infeasible at that time for it to become part of the Society Hill neighborhood.

To return from my digression, I should say that the work of the architects under WPA undoubtedly laid a groundwork for the restitution of the Society Hill area and helped to keep alive the idea and the will for such.

For our group of young persons becoming interested, in city planning, historic restoration seemed both inappropriate and totally ineffective in coping with the basic employment problems of the Depression. Only some architects benefitted. No restoration work occurred until at least 15 or 20 years later.

The first public housing project built in Philadelphia as a result of the Depression and the advent of the New Deal, was done, I believe, with PWA funding and completed near the end of the Depression. It was designed by Walter Thomas and built of very substantial materials. It was a garden-type development located in an area known as Crescentville, which was to the West of Roosevelt Boulevard near Sears Roebuck. There was no Philadelphia Housing Authority at that time, so I guess the construction was carried out by the Department of Public Works. Funding, I believe, was 100% from the federal government.

Prior to the Hillcrest project there had been one housing project of special interest, namely, the Carl Mackley cooperative project in Kensington. It was financed by the Hosiery Workers Union, along with some aid from a young man of private means named William Jeans. The architect was Oscar Stonorov and the labor, leader was John Edleman. When we formed the City Policy Committee Edleman had moved to Washington, D.C., but both Stonorov and Jeans became charter members of the City Policy Committee when it was formed in 1940.