Excavating the Vine Street Expressway: A Tour of 1950's Philadelphia Skid Row

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Article for hiddencityphila.org

March 2017

> An approach to Philadelphia not soon forgotten is on the beautiful [Benjamin Franklin] Bridge high over the river and the city, followed by Franklin Square – also known as "Bum's Park." When a traveler sees a tree-filled square with hundreds of men reclining on park benches or lined up for soup and salvation across the street then he has arrived in Philadelphia.

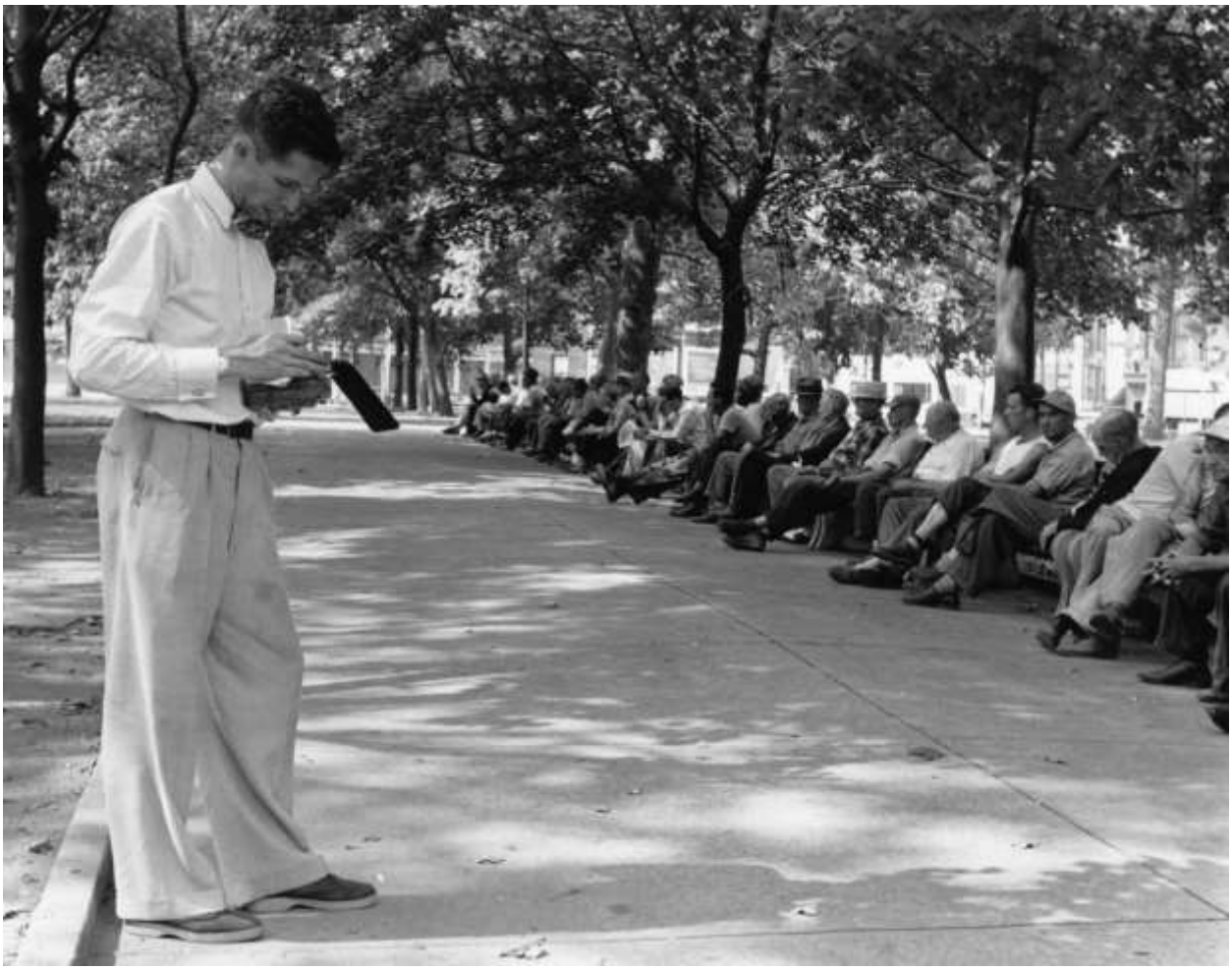
The Health and Welfare Council (HWC) opened their 1952 report "What About Philadelphia's Skid Row?" with this vignette of a motorist's first impression of Philadelphia. Coming off the bridge from New Jersey, cars would land on Vine Street at 6th Street, with Franklin Square taking up the southern side of the block and the Sunday Breakfast Mission sitting on the northwest corner. This was the gateway to Skid Row, and, for the next three blocks, Vine Street was its main drag. What follows continues the Skid Row tour that the HWC report started 65 years ago by reconstructing this segment of 1950s Vine Street that now lies buried under its namesake expressway.

The HWC report directed Philadelphia's attention to its Skid Row. Generically, skid row denoted an area, present in larger mid-twentieth century American cities, that originated as a pre-Depression era district of itinerant and near indigent workingmen. As this population aged and dwindled after World War II, these areas retained signature amenities such as cheap hotels, religious missions, and bars, all ensconced by seediness and decay. Skid Row also took on human dimensions as a symbol of alcoholism and failure, and provided a cautionary tale on the wages of sin. As most people on Skid Row were, strictly speaking, in housing, the homelessness endemic to this area manifested itself more as a form cultural and social alienation. Because of this, both the public and the social scientist held an outsized fascination with Skid Row, where, in the words of sociologist Theodore Caplow: "for the price of a subway ride, you can enter a country where the accepted principles of social interaction do not apply."

In Philadelphia, Skid Row's origins trace back to the 1890s, when contemporary accounts started referring to a "homeless man area" in the Race and Vine Streets vicinity. However, this area: north-south from Arch to Callowhill Streets and east-west from Sixth to Eleventh Streets, already had four other defining identities. The most colorful of these was the Tenderloin, Philadelphia's vice district, which by the 1950s had largely moved elsewhere, although Philadelphia newspapers would still use the terms "Skid Row" and "Tenderloin" interchangeably. In contrast, Chinatown, centered at 9th and Race Streets, was a neighborhood on the rise that overlapped with Skid Row spatially but maintained its distance socially. Third, Skid Row was in Philadelphia's rooming house district. After the initial wave of

upper-class flight to the streetcar suburbs in the late nineteenth century, this area's housing stock was subdivided and became attractive to both workingmen and white-collar workers of both genders. As the housing stock aged and deteriorated, its tenants became more uniformly poor. Finally, Skid Row blended into a transition zone containing a variety of non-residential uses: downtown-type commercial storefronts south of Vine Street and light industrial plants to the north.

The first newspaper references to a Philadelphia "skid row" occurred in 1949; by then the first steps towards its eventual demolition were already underway. Vine Street coming off the bridge was a notorious traffic bottleneck. In response, the City tore down the south-side streetscape going west from 7th Street to widen it, thereby taking the first steps towards an eventual Vine Street Expressway. Also during that time, two urban renewal areas each proposed to gut parts of Skid Row. However, further implementation of these projects would drag out over the next two decades.



Franklin Square Park, 1955. Philip Spencer (left) of Friends Neighborhood Guild (FNG) with Skid Row residents during the course of FNG's tuberculosis outreach project. Photo: Philip Taylor. Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA used with permission.

Despite this looming existential threat, the rhythms of Skid Row continued through the fifties and sixties. Franklin Square Park was the most visible manifestation of this. Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, described it as the park of "the homeless, the unemployed and the people of indigent leisure." Here:

> If the weather permits, a day-long outdoor reception holds sway. The benches at the center of the reception are filled, with a voluble standing overflow milling about. Conversational groups continually form and dissolve into one another. The guests behave respectfully to one another and are courteous to interlopers too. Almost imperceptibly, like the hand of a clock, this raggle-taggle reception creeps around the circular pool at the center of the square. And indeed, it is the hand of a clock, for it is following the sun, staying in the warmth. When the sun goes down the clock stops; the reception is over until tomorrow.

As the sun set, some would have crossed the street and queued up at the Sunday Breakfast Mission. The "Sunday B" was one of three missions on Vine Street, along with the Galilee Mission (corner of Darien Street) and the Salvation Army Harbor Light Center (corner of 8th Street). In addition, there were at least five smaller missions located just off Vine Street. The mission of these missions was to provide shelter, meals and material aid as the means to saving souls. Such evangelism was the predominant form of rehabilitation available on 1950s Skid Row. In the words of Martin Walsh, who directed the John 5:24 Mission (324 North 2nd St.), "no person could be rehabilitated unless he was 'saved'." Others took a more entrepreneurial approach to this work, consistent with Robert Fraser, known as "Philadelphia's Blind Singing Evangelist" and the director of the Fraser Radio Gospel Mission (153 North 9th St.), when he stated that the "greatest opportunity to win souls for Christ is centered at the mission."

The big three Vine Street missions were venerable Skid Row cornerstones, each with large, plain, solid buildings that reflected the gravity of their Protestant evangelism. Missions represented the lowest economic rung of Skid Row lodging, most appealing when lacking the money for any other kind of "flop". They would typically offer a free meal and dormitory bed for up to a week each month, and then charge fifteen or twenty cents a night (multiply prices in this article eight to tenfold for rough 2017 equivalents). An additional price of this aid was mandatory attendance at a religious service, and lights out was at 9 p.m. Such religious and personal structure was enough to keep many away, and led to the derisive terms of "mission stiff" for the regular habitué and "nose dive" for the act of feigning a conversion for a night's accommodations. Despite such derision, a 1961 Temple University study found that one quarter of Philadelphia's Skid Row population spent the previous night in a mission.

Several doors down from the Sunday B was the Central Hotel (623 Vine St.). Chuck Perry, in an early 1950s neighborhood inventory he compiled as a caseworker for the Friends Neighborhood Guild (FNG), describes the hotel as having:

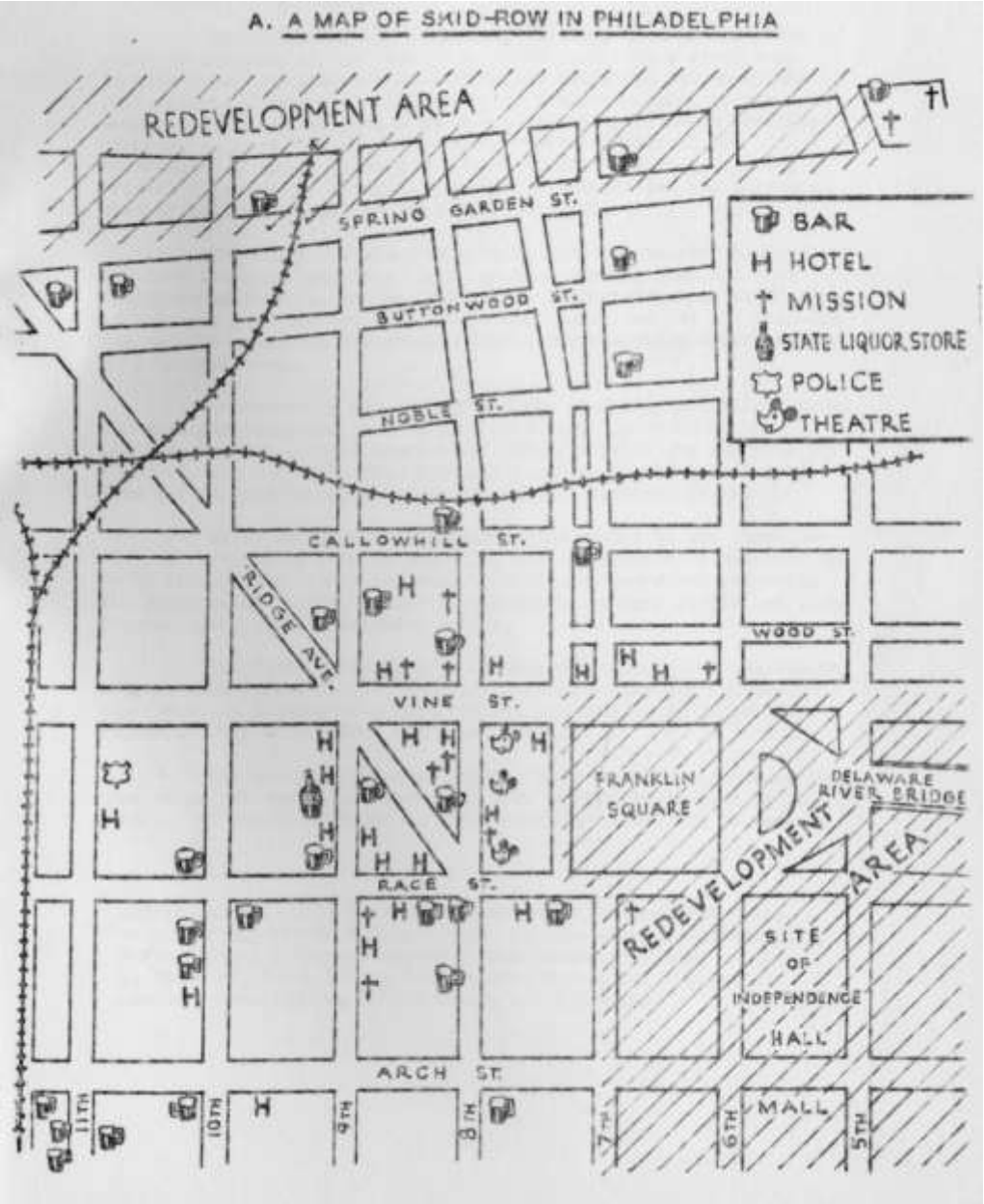
> 73 stalls and a dormitory with 32 beds. Rents are 40 cents and fifty cents a night, $1.75 per week for a dormitory, $2.50 a week for a stall. Stalls have padlocks. Clients frequently complain about the heat and facilities. Few of the stalls have windows. Lighting, ventilation, sanitation have been particularly bad, but landlord has recently

done some remodeling, in conjunction with fire-proofing ordered by the fire marshal. The lobby of the hotel is dirty and untidy and poorly lighted. Clients have reported a great deal of petty thievery. No recipient has been refused admittance regardless of his appearance or manner. Tenants are frequently drunk and disorderly and liquor is consumed quite openly. Several clients advise that the clerk makes a sizable profit from the sale of liquor on Sunday [and] lends money at exorbitant rates.

Cars coming off the Benjamin Franklin Bridge at 6th and Vine Streets, 1952. Left to right: Sunday Breakfast Mission, Top Drug Co. luncheonette, and Rubin's Employment Service. Franklin Square is off photo to the left. Photo: Elwood P. Smith. George D. McDowell Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Photographs (P716149B). Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA used with permission.

Perry's inventory includes six other similar hotels on (or just off) Vine Street between 6th and 9th Streets. A 1954 report by Perry's colleague at FNG, Philip Spencer, counted "fifteen men's hotels, generally called 'flop houses,' and four rooming houses advertised as hotels [in Skid Row]. They are two

to four stories high and house 35 to 225 men. They charge 35 to 60 cents a night for a bed." The quality of these hotels varied, but reformers shared the concerns related to health, safety, and clientele that Perry noted in his description.



Map of Philadelphia's Skid Row, with selected amenities, from the Philadelphia Health and Welfare Council's report "What About Philadelphia's Skid Row?" 1952. Source: Friends Neighborhood Guild Collection. Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA used with permission.

Nonetheless, the hotels' owners resisted efforts to shut them down. In 1950, Coroner Joseph Ominsky appealed to a judge to close the Phillips Hotel (151 N. 9th) after 17 men died there over a six month period. "It's a rat trap, a firetrap, a medieval torture chamber," Ominsky charged. "I'll admit the place isn't up to par, but what can you do?" responded owner Philip Rappaport. The hotel stayed open.

600 Block Vine Street between Marshall and 7th Streets, 1969. Left to right: McGarry's Loan Office, various rooming houses, and the Central Hotel. Photo: Jack Tinney. George D. McDowell Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Photographs (P716159B). Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA used with permission.

One source of the hotels' resilience may have been an active Skid Row vote; at least two hotel owners were party committeemen and two hotels – the Golden on 730 Race Street and the Hiway on 812 Vine, were polling places in the 1953 election. It was only after a 1962 fire killed three residents of the North 8th Street Hotel (148 N. 8th St.) that a campaign led by City Council President Paul D'Ortona succeeded in closing three hotels.

Despite often-deplorable conditions, the flophouses housed roughly forty percent of the Skid Row population on a given night. Spencer reflects that:

> The men choose to stay at the hotels for various reasons; they want a bed off of the street or out of the cold. They have limited financial resources; they like to live near bars. They have friends who stay at the hotels; they want a place where they can live and perhaps away from folks who have rejected them. They may want an independent life; they want to be with men like themselves, or they are used to living in the area.

A step up from the flophouses were the numerous rooming houses that took up the remaining structures on the 600 block of Vine Street and dotted the surrounding area. Many tenants paid rent from old age pensions and wages, others paid with welfare. Many landlords lived on the premises and also appeared to be of modest means, such as Mrs. James Allison (sic) at 625 Vine, where, in the words of Perry:

> House and furnishings are old but in good repair and very clean; house is well run, orderly, quiet. About six rooms on second floor and third floor rent for approximately $3.50 a week, including heat and light. The rooms are furnished.

Many other rooming houses were run by absentee landlords, who were more inclined to have problematic properties. The house next door to Mrs. Allison, at 627 Vine, was operated by Max Borasky, owner of the Central Hotel and several other nearby properties. Perry described 627 as a "three floor house. Very dirty and in extremely bad repair. Insects around. Three small apartments on the first floor. About eight rooms on the second floors. A few of the rooms have gas hot plates which are primarily intended for heating water, since hot water is not provided in the bathrooms. Clients frequently complain about lack of heat." Weekly rent there was six dollars for an apartment and three or four dollars for a room. The most notorious area slumlord was Jacob Rubin, dubbed the "Mayor of Rubinville" by the Philadelphia Inquirer by virtue of his owning upwards of fifty residential properties, three bars, and Rubin's Employment Service on 531 Vine. In 1960 Rubin was appointed Constable of this area, meaning that he had the authority to evict his own tenants.

All told, on any night only around five percent of the Skid Row population failed to find some type of roof under which to sleep. Sleeping outdoors or "carrying the flag" all night risked arrest for vagrancy, and an unwitting accommodation either in the House of Correction or in the 6th District's police station lockup. This station, located just off Vine Street on 11th and Winter Streets, is one of the few still-existing Skid Row structures.

Continuing down Vine Street, on the corner of 7th Street was McGarry's Loan Office. Pawnshops and second hand clothing stores were common features on Skid Row. Nothing of value lasted long on Skid Row before being either stolen, sold or hocked. Crossing 7th, a rooming house and a small, unnamed hotel occupied the slice of land between 7th and Franklin Streets. This hotel, according to Perry's notes, "preferably caters to clients of Russian and Jewish origin." Across Franklin Street, a hulking Hertz car rental garage dominated the rest of the 700 block. At the end of this block was another hotel, the St. Louis. These properties were all on the street's north side; the most notable former structure on

the barren southern side of this block was the Lyceum Theater at 720-726, razed in 1933. Around the corner on Eighth Street (between Vine and Race), were three more once-grand, Tenderloin-era theaters, all in substantial decline. Forepaugh's, at 255 N. 8th, was showing movies up to 1955 and then razed in 1960; further south on the 8th Street block were the Gayety and the Bijou, demolished in 1953 and 1967, respectively.

800 Block of Vine Street, 1947. The storefronts on the south side (left) would be demolished in 1949 for street widening. George D. McDowell Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Photographs (P716162B). Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA used with permission.

On the 800 block of Vine Street, among the longest standing storefronts was Brady's Grill at 815. Brady's appears to have been a typical Skid Row bar, surviving through the 1960s behind an uninviting façade and a nondescript sign. In Skid Row bars of that time, "Sneaky Pete" wine was fifteen cents a glass, but the advice given a reporter was to never drink from a glass unless you have to. Reporters' accounts noted the distinct lack of both sociability and attention to interior décor. These were places for

drinking, where, depending on available cash, patrons either would slam drinks or nurse them to maximize the time they would be able to remain inside. In 1970, reporter Bill Speers wrote how, in the area bars:

> Almost every rule in the Liquor Control Board handbook is being violated. First off, the bars are dirty. In the bar next to the Gem [Hotel at 250 N. 9th Street, bar would be the Green Lantern at 248], the brightest item in the place is the owner's 1969-70 liquor license. In addition to serving visibly intoxicated persons, they also sell on credit. … Wine quarts are sold over the counter and merchandise—no questions asked—accepted in lieu of money. The back of one bar looks like a pawn shop.

821-831 Vine Street, 1964. From left, Jerry's restaurant, the Francis Hotel, the Victory luncheonette, and (at the far end) the Galilee Mission were present in the early 1950s. Photo by Brian H. Davies, used with permission. (https://www.flickr.com/photos/fwyalchen/5574655143).

In 1958, sociologist Earl Rubington counted 23 liquor outlets and a State-run liquor store in the Skid Row area. Based on that he calculated the per capita outlet rate to have been about four times that of the general city. The bars were mostly on the numbered streets, particularly on 8th and 9th Streets between Race and Vine. The only time these bars garnered attention was in the wake of either criminal activity or police raids for underage drinking or serving visibly intoxicated patrons. On one night in 1964, police arrested bartenders at three bars on one block of 8th Street: at 238, 248 and 251. Neither did the

drinkers get a break, as the HWC report tallied 8,739 Skid Row arrests for drunkenness in 1950, one quarter of all such arrests in Philadelphia. While there were only two accounts of bars actually located on Vine Street in the 1950s, Skid Row's most notorious purveyor of alcohol operated out of a cigar store at the corner of 8th and Vine Streets. In 1965, Max Feinberg received a manslaughter conviction for selling the Sterno, a heating fuel containing 54 percent wood alcohol and known as "canned heat," that caused the poisoning deaths of 35 Skid Row residents in a one-month period.

Another longtime fixture of the 800 block of Vine Street was Jerry's Restaurant, which, according to Hoag Livens in a 1969 Philadelphia Inquirer article, "offered a lima bean soup special for 25 cents and what is probably the last of the 10-cent cups of coffee in town." Hotels and rooming houses did not provide cooking facilities, and thus cheap restaurants were another Skid Row staple. The Busy Bee, just off Vine Street on 263 N. Ninth Street, offered a menu with a choice of 25-cent plates (1947 prices), including: lamb stew, scrapple and egg, and Boston beans. The Liberty luncheonette was also on the 800 block, and if those were unaffordable, the street's three aforementioned missions provided meals for all comers.

Between the Salvation Army and Galilee missions on the 800 block was the Matt Talbot House, the only Catholic presence on Skid Row until St. John's Hospice opened in 1963 at 12th and Race Streets. Matt Talbot House ministered to alcoholics and operated a thrift store for financial support. Four hotels: the Hiway, the Francis, the Clover and the Gem, were all either on or just off this block. 811 Vine Street was a longstanding barbershop.

Aerial view of Vine Street Expressway segment that now stand runs over Vine Street from 4th to 9th Streets, 2017. Vine Street's former location can be traced by extending the eastern segment of Vine Street westward across the map. The Benjamin Franklin Bridge descent (bottom right) is in the same position it was in the 1950s. Image: Google Maps.

Although Skid Row's boundary stretched west to 11th Streets, the district's physical imprint upon Vine Street effectively ended at 9th Street. One exception was Teasley's flyer distribution service on the corner of 11th Street. This "muzzling" work, along with the Rubin's Employment Service on the 500 block of Vine Street, provided the temporary labor opportunities that were the preference of Skid Row men. Beyond this, much of the 900 block was the site of the Holy Redeemer Church and School, a key Chinatown institution that sidestepped the expressway construction after a protracted campaign against its demolition. Otherwise, many of the buildings on these blocks were warehouses, dry cleaners, and clothing manufacturing enterprises.

Corner of 8th and Vine Streets, looking north, 1973. Photo: James A. Craig. George D. McDowell Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Photographs (P567035B). Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, PA used with permission.

The early 1950s marked both Philadelphia Skid Row's heyday and, with the demolition of Vine Street's southern streetscape, the first visible indicator of its demise. Besides the expressway plans, the Skid Row segment of Vine Street was the dividing line between two urban renewal areas: Franklin to the north and Independence to the south. This sense of marked time reinforced Skid Row's endemic sense of fatalism and decline. Landlords pleaded the futility of making improvements in the face of imminent demolition, and social workers fretted about where the men would relocate when the wrecking ball finally swung. The progress of these urban renewal projects could be measured by Skid Row's population decline: gradual at first from 3,000 in 1952 to 2,857 in 1960; and more rapidly to 800 in 1969 and to 300 in 1975. Skid Row's official end came in 1976, when the last remaining Skid Row hotel, the Darien on 323 N. Darien Street, came down.

The Vine Street Expressway, not completed until 1991, has obliterated all traces of Skid Row Vine Street with the exception of Franklin Square. Any debate for preserving the signature rat traps and fire traps of Skid Row is now a hypothetical one. Nonetheless, Skid Row's absence is felt. Homelessness has proliferated in its wake. Today it is much more visible, less geographically contained, and doubtlessly more prolific following the destruction of a large swath of the rooming house and hotel stock in and around Skid Row, which allowed many to maintain an anonymous, independent subsistence. At this point, if one were to commemorate Skid Row, it would be best to return to Franklin Square, where it is still possible to follow the sun around the fountain and watch the cars make their descent into the city.