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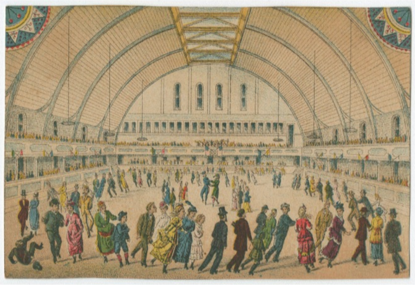
HISTORY

Let's Skate! Take A Spin Around Philly's Bygone Roller Rinks

SEPTEMBER 24, 2014 | by Rachel Hildebrandt



Chestnut Street Skating Rink at 23rd and Chestnut Streets | Image: Library Company of Philadelphia

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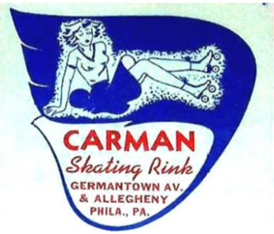
Following the Great Depression, families now with income to spare flocked to Philadelphia's avenues to socialize and to be entertained. They went to eat and to shop and to see movies. There were more than 400 movie theaters in Philadelphia, as I reported on these pages last year, most of them in neighborhood shopping districts. They also loved to roller skate. Almost every Philadelphia resident was a short trolley ride away from a rink. And just as some of the old movie houses still remain–over 100 of them put to other uses–roller rink buildings too have survived.

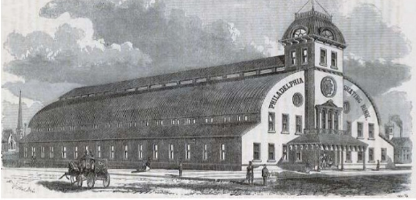
A few, like Carman Gardens on Germantown Avenue, where we'll celebrate the Hidden City Daily's third anniversary October 3, are still open. (You can find out more about the skate party and fundraiser HERE.)



Unlike movie theaters, roller rinks do not require a great deal of infrastructure. Virtually any spacious room can be adapted for use as a rink. Of the 23 rinks that opened in Philadelphia between 1900 and 1970, less than half were in buildings that were constructed with roller skating in mind. Fourteen were installed in structures that originally served other purposes, eight of which were originally theaters. Examining this phenomena a little closer, I came to see realize that three types of rinks existed in Philadelphia during the heyday of roller skating: the traditional purpose-built rink, theater-turned-rink, and rink housed in buildings with multiple, changing uses.

Purpose-built Roller Rinks

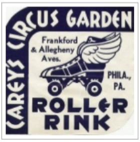
Americans' interest in roller skating has waxed and waned over the last three centuries. Only handful of roller rinks were built in the late nineteenth century. Those that were purpose-built featured lush ornamentation inside and out, and amenities comparable to movie palaces, including parlors and "retiring rooms." Two local rinks from this era–the Philadelphia Skating Rink at 21st and Race Streets and Chestnut Street Skating Rink at 23rd and Chestnut Streets–are classic examples of mid-19th century roller skating opulence.

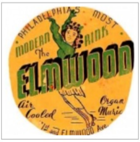


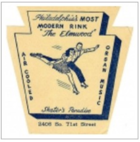
The sport really took off in the late 1930s. Due largely to the wholesale marketing efforts of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association, the construction of thousands of rinks blanketed the nation. According to Lou Brooks, the author of *Skate Crazy: Amazing Graphics from the Golden Age of Roller Skating*, there were over 3,000 American rinks by 1942.

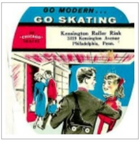
Of the twenty-three roller rinks in Philadelphia, ten were purpose-built. Located on commercial corridors throughout the city, purpose-built rinks typically look like minimally decorated warehouses. Function dictated form: the floor–either wood or plastic–and air quality inside the rink were more important to customers than the building's appearance.

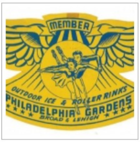
A collection of Philadelphia skating rink logos from the 1940s and 1950s:

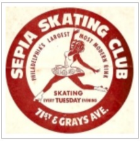

CAREY'S CIRCUS GARDEN
Frankford & Allegheny Aves.
PHILA., PA.
ROLLER RINK

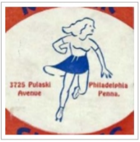


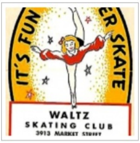












Only one purpose-built rink remains open for business in the city: Elmwood Roller Rink at 71st Street and Grays Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia. A modest venue with little distinction today, Elmwood Roller Rink was once a state-of-the art facility, as evinced in a 1947 issue of Billboard Magazine advertisement. Elmwood boldly declared itself “one of the finest in the east” and pointed to endearingly antiquated amenities such as picturesque scenery, Hammond organ music, and a complete change of air every three minutes.

Unfortunately, only two other examples of purpose-built rinks survive today: Circus Gardens at 3155 Frankford Avenue, now a Family Dollar, and Concord Roller Skating Rink at 7049 Frankford Avenue, which was repurposed into a Mr. Storage facility.

Elmwood Roller Skating Rink, 71st Street and Grays Avenue | Photo: Sam Margulies

© City of Philadelphia, Department of Records
ROLLER SKATING

Adelphia Skating Rink at 3913 Market Street in 1956 | Image: City of Philadelphia: Department of Records

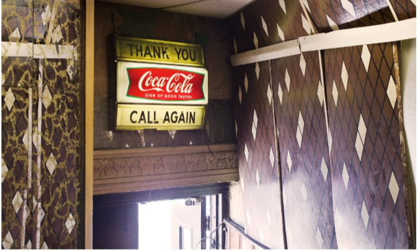
Theaters-Turned-Roller Rinks

In 1944, ten years after the

Metropolitan Opera House had closed, “ballroom operator” Charles Solomon announced plans to transform the building’s first floor into a skating rink. According to *Billboard Magazine*, “Increasing popularity of roller skating here, particularly among war workers, resulted in Solomon’s considering the conversion.”

Typically, theaters-turned-roller rinks are impossible to distinguish, detectable only by historic records and the faint remnants of ghost signage. A few examples of rink conversions include:

- Plaza Theater (Broad and Porter Streets)
- Alhambra Theater (East Passyunk Avenue, above Morris Street)
- Olympia Theater (South Broad Street, between Fitzwater and Bainbridge Streets)
- Carman Theater (Germantown and Allegheny Avenues)
- Harrowgate Theater (Kensington Avenue and Russell Street)
- Imperial Theater (60th and Walnut Streets)
- Theater 1812 (Chestnut Street, between 18th and 19th Streets)
- Metropolitan Opera House (Broad and Poplar Streets)



The original ornate plaster work from when Carman Gardens was a theater can be seen over the door frame | Photo: Peter Woodall

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GERMANTOWN & ALLEGHENY AVES.
CARMAN ROLLER RINK
PHILADELPHIA

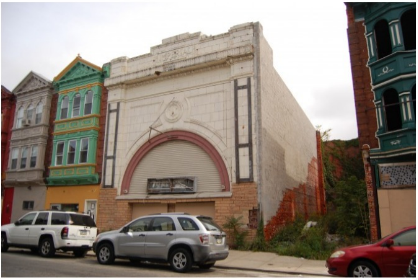
CARMAN GARDENS
GOSPEL
ROLLER SKATING

Carman Gardens at Germantown and Allegheny Avenues in North Philadelphia is the only remaining theater-turned-roller rink open today. Established in 1932, it is the oldest continually operating roller rink in Philadelphia and may be one of the oldest in the country. Open from 1920 until 1929, Carman Theater was converted into a rink shortly after entertainment entrepreneur William C. Carman built a much bigger 2,200-seat theater at the same intersection.

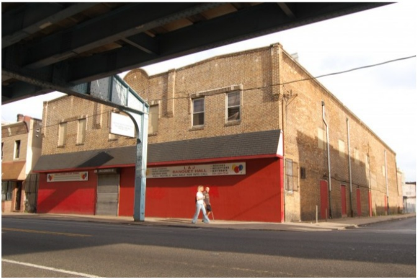
Traces of the old theater still exist

today. The brick walls feature simple pilasters topped by capitals that seamlessly transition into crown molding. The projection room and office, located at the top of an elegant staircase, are used to store equipment. The slanted floor, built so that all movie patrons could see the screen, is hidden beneath a level of well-maintained wood.

These theaters-turned-rinks have fared much better than purpose-built rinks, though many are in jeopardy of demolition or decay as they await a third act. Five of the eight originals are still in existence today.



Entrance to the Imperial (formerly the Imperial Theater) at 60th and Walnut Streets in West Philadelphia | Photo: Sam Margulies



Kensington Roller Rink (originally Harrowgate Theater) under the El at 3419 Kensington Avenue | Photo: Sam Margulies

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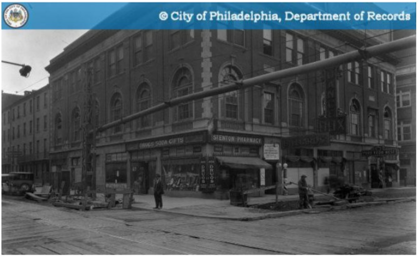
Roller Rinks Housed in Multi-Purpose Buildings

In the mid twentieth-century, entrepreneurs inserted roller rinks into mixed use buildings like private halls and even Catholic schools.

Dance Box Roller Rink is a recognizable example of a rink housed in a multi-purpose building. Now home to Philadelphia International Records, the rink was located on the second floor of the building at Broad and Spruce Streets. Dance Box was open most evenings, charging men 40 cents for admission and women only 30.



The second floor Dance Box in 1929 | Photo: City of Philadelphia, Department of Records

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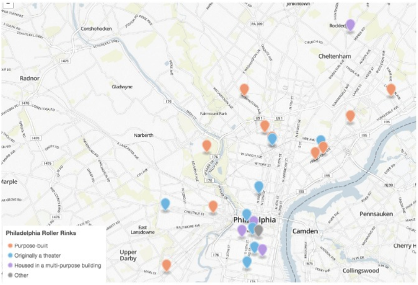
Other rinks

The original use of the large building that would become the El Torian Skating Palace, now Bella Vista Beer Distributor, at 11th and Catharine Streets remains unknown. It appears to have been owned by John J. Tyler before being converted into the El Torian, one of the largest roller rinks in the city. It boasted "the sweetest music you've ever skated to" and "cushioned floors." The El Torian was a well known breeding ground for talent and routinely sent its most gifted patrons to the annual *Daily News*-sponsored roller skating championships.



The interactive version of the map can be found HERE

Author's Note: *Special thanks to Natalie Wright and Sam Margulies for their assistance.*

TAGS: ADAPTIVE REUSE

CARMAN GARDENS

ELMWOOD ROLLER SKATING RINK

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ROLLER RINKS ROLLER SKATING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Hildebrandt **Rachel Hildebrandt**, a graduate of PennDesign, is a native Philadelphian who is passionate about the changing city she inhabits. Before beginning her graduate studies in historic preservation with a focus on policy, Rachel obtained a B.A. in Psychology from Chestnut Hill College and co-authored two books, The Philadelphia Area Architecture of Horace Trumbauer (2009) and Oak Lane, Olney, and Logan (2011). She currently works as a senior program manager at Partners for Sacred Places.

16 Comments:

1. *Ed Carson* says:
   September 24, 2014 at 10:54 am

   "The original use of the large building that would become the El Torian Skating Palace, now Bella Vista Beer Distributor, at 11th and Catharine Streets" In Bromley's "Atlas of the City of Philadelphia" 1895 edition this building is shown as the 11th Street Market.

   Leave a Reply
2. *gene* says:
   September 24, 2014 at 11:52 am

   Besides the Carmen RR, Willow grove park had a great RR. I spent many a day there in the late 40's

Leave a Reply

3. *James F. Clark* says:
   September 24, 2014 at 3:52 pm

   I believe that dances were held at the Carman also. Remember going there for a dance a couple of times back in the late 50's.

   Leave a Reply

4. *Teflon Donna* says:
   September 24, 2014 at 3:53 pm

   Sounds like the Philly Roller Girls could turn one of these venues in jeopardy into a new home venue!

   Leave a Reply

5. *harryk* says:
   September 24, 2014 at 10:58 pm

   Let's not forget ICE skating in Philly… See https://hiddencityphila.org/2014/01/ice-skating-philadelphia-pastime

   Leave a Reply

6. *Tone* says:
   September 24, 2014 at 11:01 pm

   One bygone skating rink that many Philadelphians were familiar with wasn't even the city!The facility I'm referring to was the Glendora skating rink in Glendora N.J. whose sign was viewed by millions on rt.42 on their countless trips to the Jersey shore!

Leave a Reply

7. *Valerie H.* says:
   October 1, 2014 at 4:45 pm

   My sisters and I spent the entire decade of the 1960s skating at the Elmwood in Southwest Philly on Sunday afternoons, from 2pm to 5pm. We had our own skates but, of course, you could rent. They had a DJ with all the latest and popular radio tunes, with calls for "Lovers Only" and "Ladies' Choice." I believe the white kids went on Saturday afternoon — and then gathered along 58th Street to throw rocks and bottles at the G busses that we were riding on to get home.

   Leave a Reply

   1. *Ephateria Taylor* says:
      December 17, 2021 at 9:02 am

      I'm not that old but I'm

sure that was true . By the time I was of age to go over there they was gone it was only a lil left but we fought the bus over there also from south Philly .

Leave a Reply

8. *GLENN* says:
   October 13, 2014 at 7:59 pm

   you forgot the one where the school is now at frankford and ontario

   Leave a Reply

   1. *Ken Biddle* says:
      March 19, 2018 at 11:45 am

      The skating rink on Frankford Ave. above Ontario was called Playland roller rink the address was 3434 Frankford Ave.

      Leave a Reply

9. *Deborah* says:
   January 5, 2017 at 8:39 pm

   Hello:
   I was fondly reminiscing about how I loved to go roller skating as a child. I would go with my cousins at St.

Elizabeth's at 23rd & Berks Street. I would go on Sunday afternoons. It was so much fun- traveling from one section of North Philadelphia to another with my roller skates with matching pom-poms and stoppers. Does anyone else remember skating at "Saint E's?"

Leave a Reply

10. *Barbara* says:
    December 30, 2018 at 9:56 pm

    I skated at the Carman every Sunday when I was in my late teens. Took my first lessons there!

    Leave a Reply

11. *Ali* says:
    January 13, 2021 at 11:43 pm

    There was a roller skating rink on the 40th block of Lancaster Ave. West Philly. That was a supermarket, a banked track (Phila Warriors roller derby practice/training location) briefly and then turned into a roller skating rink. Are there any pictures of that (1974-1980s???

Leave a Reply

   1. *Teana Tullock* says:
      July 2, 2022 at 3:49 am

      I skated at Lancaster roller rink40th and Lancaster Ave in Philadelphia, PA in the late 1970's- to the 1980's every Friday-Sunday that was the best time of my life. I have so many wonderful memories from skating there. Does anyone have any pictures from the rink? My name is Teana

      Leave a Reply

12. *Sheila Ptah* says:
    December 1, 2021 at 10:14 am

    Hi Ali& all Skaters,
    I had plenty of good times and a trophy for freestyle at the Lancaster Ave where the Phila Warriors used to practice and train. I attended there so much that the owner, i forget his name for now, would let us in for free because we were so dedicated to attending and having fun. This skating ring kept me and me friend out of

a lot of trouble as kids.
Sheila
P.S. I also won a trophy at the 69th st skating rink(Shayvoo) in the late 70's early 80's, Im 58 years old now. I forget the name.

Leave a Reply

13. *Sheila Ptah* says:
    December 1, 2021 at 10:17 am

    I'm interested in establishing an outdoor pavillion style skating rink anywhere from Cobbs Creek to the heart of North & West Philly. I have good grant writing skills but no supporters,
    shedeliver88@gmail.com
    Sheila Ptah

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