



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 1002

**Philadelphia (Pa.). City Council.
Petitions to the Select and Common Councils**

**1783-1868 (bulk 1800-1821)
2 boxes, 0.8 lin. ft.**

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Processing Completed: May 2004

Sponsor: Processing made possible by a grant from the
National Endowment for the Humanities

Restrictions: None

Related Collections at City of Philadelphia Ordinances (1722),

HSP: Collection 1022

City of Philadelphia Ordinance (1789), Library
Company of Philadelphia Collection
Philadelphia City Council Minute book (1789-
1793), Collection 1411

Philadelphia Committee on Markets Minutes
(1729-1831), Collection 1316

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Abstract

The Select and Common Councils of Philadelphia comprised the legislative branch of city government from 1691 until 1919. The councils were responsible for building and maintaining the city's infrastructure and enacting legislation. Most of these petitions, 1783-1868, are requests for paving specific sections of the city's streets, although some concern transportation issues and requests regarding the city's marketplaces. There are a handful of copies of resolutions passed by the councils.

Background note

The Common Council of Philadelphia was established under William Penn's charter in 1691. The council originally included only officers of the proprietorship, but became an elected governing body in 1789. The Select Council was formed in 1796, and the two councils then had a collective membership of thirty-two men. The Select Council, also an elected body, was responsible for choosing the city's mayors until 1839, and it also enjoyed other executive privileges, including the appointment of city officers, until 1885. At that point all executive power was transferred to the mayor. In 1919 the city's charter was revised and the Select and Common Councils combined to form one City Council. Philadelphia's legislative branch of government has remained unicameral ever since.

The Select and Common Councils were responsible for enacting legislation regarding civil laws and city infrastructure. Because they were elected by the free population, council members also had a responsibility to their constituents and received numerous requests and petitions for internal improvements.

Scope & content

Petitions to the Select and Common Councils of Philadelphia, of which there are approximately 200, are arranged chronologically. Oversized petitions are housed separately at the end of the collection. The petitions are largely comprised of requests for improved street conditions. Some petitions were signed by just a few citizens, others by dozens. Most request that roads be paved for ease of travel and to improve sanitary

conditions. Most of the petitions concern streets between Front and Broad Streets, and Vine and South Streets.

A common request called for the paving of Market Street west of 9th Street. This street was cited as the most frequently traveled route to areas in the western part of Philadelphia and the western counties. Other petitions cite the bad economic conditions to which the unpaved roads contributed: carts with supplies and merchandise were often unable to travel on unpaved roads, especially in the winter months. One 1803 petition regarding the paving of Chestnut Street stated that the street was impassable in the winter, and that the dust was so heavy in the summer that people's possessions and merchandise were damaged. Another petition argued that when it rained, the street became so thick with mud that carts would sink up to the axels.

In addition to the inconvenience caused by unpaved streets and the effect that they might have on commerce, many petitions also note the poor sanitary conditions that the unpaved streets encouraged. Sewers and privies, which were often simply gutters on the sides of the streets, did not drain properly on unpaved streets. Bailing them was sometimes necessary to prevent them from becoming festering rivers of waste. Even when the sewers and gutters drained properly, many residents complained that heavy rains caused the streets to flood and form pools of stagnant water, eventually contaminating the wells and local drinking water. Residents in these neighborhoods also found that their cellars often flooded after a heavy rain.

Some petitioners not only requested paved roads for their own use, but also claimed to have the entire city's best interest at heart. An 1816 petition discusses the proposed paving of Broad Street between Chestnut and South Streets. The petitioners felt that paving that portion of Broad Street would not be worth the time, effort, and money required. They instead requested that 13th Street be paved, stating that Broad Street was still too far removed from certain "improvements" taking place in the city and that 13th Street would be more appealing to builders and others businessmen who wished to invest in the city's marketplace.

In addition to the petitions regarding the paving of streets, which comprise the majority of the collection, there are several other petitions concerning other city improvements, many of them pertaining to the city's markets. An 1808 petition asked that the city erect a new market house on Market Street between 12th and 13th Streets, stating that there were many residents living in the "Western part" of the city for whom the other markets were too far. A petition from grain millers asked that the councils renew their grant to keep stalls at the market. Another petition requested that the councils open a market on Sunday morning, stating that many citizens who were without cellars had no means of keeping meats and produce and needed to do their shopping the same day. The petitioners appealed to the councils' knowledge that "wholesome nutriment" was essential to good health.

All petitions are handwritten except an 1868 petition regarding freight transportation in the city, which the petitioners described as "disgraceful and revolting to the feelings of our citizens." In particular these citizens concerned themselves with the area on Broad

Street near Market, where there were many institutions of learning, which were constantly disturbed by "the incessant crack of the whip, the clattering of hoofs, and oaths of the mule-drivers."

Most petitions to the councils are formal and polite. Many petitioners acknowledged that the city probably received a multitude of similar requests. Still, a number of residents tactfully mentioned that the taxes they paid each year usually went to improving other areas, leaving their own streets unpaved. Occasionally there are duplicates of petitions or copies of resolutions passed by the councils, indicating that they planned to pave some of the streets.

Also included is a manuscript "Account of the Monies of the Legacy of the late Doct^r Benjamin Franklin at Interest on Bonds," dated 1811, which lists the names of the bondholders.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

City of Philadelphia Ordinances (1722), Collection 1022
City of Philadelphia Ordinance (1789), Library Company of Philadelphia Collection
Philadelphia City Council Minute book (1789-1793), Collection 1411
Philadelphia Committee on Markets Minutes (1729-1831), Collection 1316

Bibliography

City of Philadelphia. City Council Agency homepage,
<http://www.phila.gov/phils/Docs/Inventor/graphics/agencies/A120.htm> (accessed 17
May 2004)

Subjects

Civic improvement – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Community development, Urban – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Drainage – Health aspects
Drainage – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Marketplaces – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Pavement – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Politics and government – 19th century
Public health – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Roads, Earth – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Roads – Maintenance and repair
Sewage – Health aspects
Streets – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Transportation – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Water quality – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century

Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790 – Estate

Philadelphia (Pa.). Councils. Common Council
Philadelphia (Pa.). Councils. Select Council

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research

Acquisition information

Gift of Robert Bethell and George S. Bethell, 1871.

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Philadelphia (Pa.). City Council Petitions (Collection 1002), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

These petitions were formerly bound into two large volumes with the call number Am .3922 (folio). The volumes were disbound and the petitions are housed in boxes.

Processing made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this finding aid do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Box and folder listing

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Petitions	1801	1	4
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Petitions	May – Dec. 1802	1	6
Petitions	Jan – Mar. 1802	1	7
Petitions	Apr. – Dec. 1803	1	8
Petitions	Jan. - May 1804	1	9
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Petitions	1820-1821	1	24
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Petitions – oversized	1784-1807	2	1
Petitions – oversized	1808-1813	2	2
Account of Benjamin Franklin's legacy	1811-1812	2	3