

The Presser Home For Retired Music Teachers

By Joseph Richards, 2022 Presser Summer Intern

Designed by Henry E. Batton, The Presser Home for Retired Teachers was built in 1914, next to Theodore Presser's personal home. The two properties were then altered, into the three story, H-shaped building seen in many photographs. That building still stands today.

Inspiration in Creating a Home

The *Casa di Riposo per Musicisti*, (House of Rest for Musicians) in Milan, Italy, founded by Guiseppe Verdi, an Italian opera composer, inspired and motivated music educator and publisher Theodore Presser to found a similar home here in Philadelphia, accessible to people across the United States.

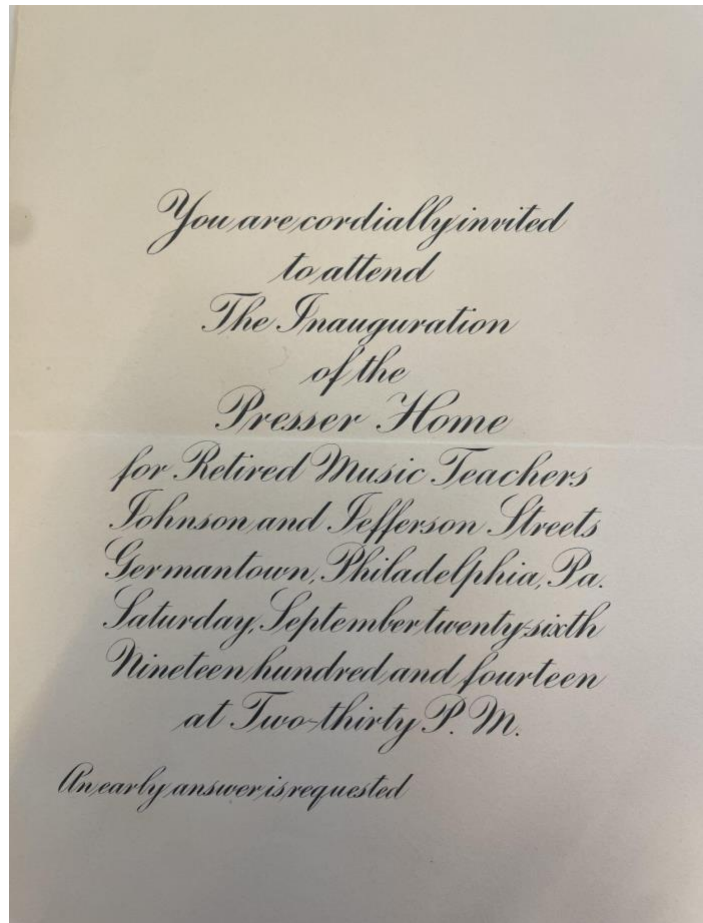


Early Endeavors

Before the Presser Home for Retired Music Teachers existed, Mr. Presser supported other endeavors to assist retired music teachers and musicians, such as "The Presser Home for Aged Musicians," which opened in 1906. However, this home was unsuccessful and left with few applicants due to, as someone pointed out to Mr. Presser, many people not wanting to consider themselves aged. The failure of his home, led to the renovation and re-opening of a new home (with a new name) in 1914.

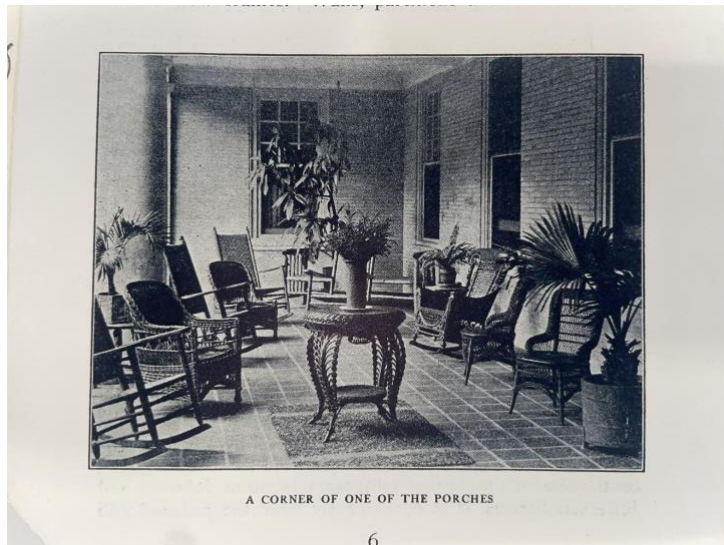
The Opening

The home opened at 2:30 PM on Saturday September 26th, 1914, with a ribbon cutting ceremony and opening words from the mayor of Philadelphia at the time, Rudolph Frankenburg. Mr. Presser also used the opportunity of this opening to reach out to a variety of music support groups, such as The National Federation of Music Clubs, one of the biggest musical nonprofits in the United States, and musicians such as Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award winner and violinist Maud Powell, whom he asked to attend and perform at the opening. She sent a recording of *Deep River* by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor to be played on the day of the opening, a song which she transcribed, along with her attendance and performance. On that day, two baritone opera singers, Henri Scott (1896-1942) and David Bispham (1857-1921) both performed at the opening of the home.



The Home

The Home was designed as a home for music teachers over the age of 65 who had taught music for at least 25 years.



Approximately a year after the home opened, a distributed pamphlet, titled “Presser Home for Retired Music Teachers” included a list of home board members and staff, as well as attributes of the house, the members currently residing in the house, and images of the building, rooms, and

lounge spaces. It even included an application on the back. At the time, there was a \$200 down payment, in order to financially support and care for any individuals living at the Presser Home.

The house was expanded in 1931 in order to increase the number of facilities, redecorate, and better accommodate the residents who lived there. The Home housed more than 100 individuals over the course of over 50+ years; it even withstood a fire in 1971 (which introduced the prohibition of smoking in the home). The house closed in 1979, with many of the individuals living there still being financially supported by The Presser Foundation in Cathedral Village and other assisted living facilities throughout the Greater Philadelphia area and through the Assistance to Music Teachers program.

Life in the Home

Charles Fowler wrote an article offering one of the few glimpses into the people who cherished the Presser Home. Titled *A Visit to the Presser Home for Retired Musicians*, Mr. Fowler met and interviewed Mr. Baker, the director of the home at the time, as well as the residents. During the interview, Mr. Baker said “Concerts are an integral part of the weekly life here, soloists and groups are invited to perform, and quite often the people in residence draw on their own musical resources and

perform for each other.” Mr. Fowler also interviewed residents from a range of ages, discussing their contributions to their local communities throughout the nation, their time spent at the home, their performances for other individuals in the home, their time practicing in the music rooms throughout the building, and their time spent going to the Academy of Music to hear The Philadelphia Orchestra. In this article, Mr. Fowler focused on many of the aspects that Theodore Presser valued in the home - community and the enjoyment of music, specifically the bond that music creates, which brought individuals together in the home.



Miss Crane, a former piano teacher, pursues drawing and painting in the Activities Room.

Love in the Home

At times, the Presser Home celebrated more than camaraderie and an appreciation for music; it celebrated love as well. At times, married couples who were both involved in music would move to the home. In 1940, Connecticut couple Ruth Starr and Charles Starr celebrated their 50th golden wedding anniversary surrounded by their friends in the home, with the help of their friend, best man, and superintendent of the home board, Mr. Foy.



An excerpt from a letter commemorating the anniversary and renewal of vows stated, “The bride and groom entered the dining room and were greeted with healthy applause. A most delicious dinner was served, concluding with squares of golden ice cream, bearing the inscription “50th anniversary,” accompanied with pieces of the wedding cake, cut by the bride’s fair fingers.” Included in this letter was a picture, taken after the Starrs read their vows, with both of them in their original wedding outfits.

Leaving the Home

Unfortunately, the Home became too expensive to maintain over time. As it needed a number of renovations towards the end of the 1970s, The Presser Foundation found it easier to help take care of the individuals by integrating them into a bigger community with more companionship. As a result, starting in 1979, the individuals that lived in the Presser Home were moved to another residential community center named Cathedral Village. More than 50 residents moved together to the Village over the course of five years, and became a part of another community whether they were able to share their enjoyment of music and common interests with a larger

elderly community. During this move, certain individuals such as Mr. Baker, the director of the home, and portions of the staff in the home were also brought along with the residents as staff to help residents integrate and keep a sense of community in their new home.

How the Home Lived On

Mr. Presser's generosity clearly impacted similarly minded individuals such as Merle Holloway, an individual in the Foundation's Assistance to Music Teachers grantmaking program, who also lived in the home for its final years before it closed. Although Ms. Holloway only spent a few years in the home, her time before the home was filled with music. She served as president of the Florida Music Teachers Association in 1945 and created her own music program for teachers at East Texas State University in 1973. In her early career, she worked as a concert



pianist in New York and Chicago before moving to Florida at the age of seventeen. She founded the Tampa Music Teachers Association, which functions as a nonprofit to this day under the National Music Teachers Association (which was started by Theodore Presser in 1876). While she spent a majority of her time helping the residents of Florida learn the piano, she often traveled and taught a variety of students over many years, including Jennie*, who Ms. Holloway taught for many years and who spoke at her funeral. From the eulogy Jennie gave at the funeral, we see glimpses into Ms. Holloway's other travels throughout many states. Jennie also shared how Ms. Holloway always helped others, as she spent one weekend per month with Jennie training her. Jennie also shared a variety of anecdotes about meeting friends and

colleagues of Ms. Holloway's at dinners and social gatherings, a kind of philanthropy that fostered connections between musicians and those passionate about music.

Concluding Thoughts

Through the blessings of Mr. Presser's efforts, he created a home that fostered a great deal of inspiration to individuals who cared about music education; his efforts were magnified ten-fold by those whom he supported. While the Presser Home's closing may be considered by some to be a sad facet of its history, it's clear to see how the Assistance to Music Teachers program, which focuses on the financial aid for people in need to help cover medical costs and expenses for individuals who have taught music, has continued to revitalize life for retired music teachers across the country. That program is still a great resource and way to honor Mr. Presser's memory and hopes for the world of music.

** - last name not included*