

PRESERVING THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
PHILADELPHIA'S LEGACY USED BOOKSTORES AS LIVING HERITAGE

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Introduction

Philadelphia’s used bookstore sector has seen a marked decline in recent years, offering empirical evidence of a worrying broader trend. Around 2010, the city boasted roughly 20 secondhand bookshops, but by 2025 only about 13 remained.¹ This contraction underscores the urgent need to recognize and safeguard long-standing used bookstores before they disappear.

Understanding the significance of this decline first requires clarifying what is meant by “used bookstores” and how they differ from independent bookstores and public libraries. In this study, the term “independent bookstores” primarily refers to independently owned stores that specialize in selling new books and often cater to the latest market trends—such as hosting cafés or curating bestsellers.² “Used bookstores,” by contrast, specialize in secondhand and out-of-print materials, offering extensive inventories, compact yet flexible spatial arrangements, and environments that foster spontaneous discovery, affordability, and a layered literary history.³ While used bookstores and libraries both promote intellectual access and community memory, they differ in important ways. Libraries are public institutions offering systematic cataloging and organized retrieval, designed for civic engagement and multifunctional service.⁴

¹ Diana Marder, “OPEN BOOK,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 10, 2010; 2025 data compiled by the author from on-site surveys, bookstore websites, and interviews with bookstore owners.

² Where appropriate, the broader category of independent bookstores—including both new and used book retailers—will be noted explicitly. For definition on independent bookstore, see American Booksellers Association, “*Member Directory in Philadelphia*,” accessed on March 03, 2025, https://www.bookweb.org/member_directory/search/ABAMember/results/0/philadelphia/0/0.

³ Kristen Doyle Highland, *The Spaces of Bookselling: Stores, Streets, and Pages*. of Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁴ Shannon Mattern, “Library as Infrastructure,” *Places Journal*, 2014, accessed on September 21, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.22269/140609>.

Used bookstores, by contrast, are privately run spaces where browsing depends more on serendipitous discovery and personal exchange. Their character reflects the distinct intellectual vision of their owners rather than public mandates.

Within this sector, legacy used bookstores—defined here as independently operated secondhand bookstores that have been in continuous operation for over thirty years⁵—hold particular cultural and historical significance. Recognizing these differences foregrounds the specific heritage values and preservation needs of legacy used bookstores, which this study seeks to examine.

At the same time, a paradox becomes evident: while independent bookstores selling new books have experienced a well-documented resurgence, used bookstores—particularly legacy used bookstores—have continued to decline. The American Booksellers Association reported nearly a 50% increase in independent bookshops nationwide between 2009 and 2018.⁶ While scholars have increasingly focused on the offline retail resurgence and community-building role of new independent bookstores, legacy used bookstores—particularly those with deep-rooted histories—remain notably absent from scholarly discourse. Existing literature rarely acknowledges these spaces as legacy small businesses and cultural custodians embedded within the social and spatial fabric of cities, instead framing them primarily as commercial enterprises. This oversight

⁵ San Francisco Government, “*Legacy Business Program*,” accessed November 2024, <https://www.sf.gov/legacy-business-program>.

⁶ Ryan L. Raffaelli, *Reinventing Retail: The Novel Resurgence of Independent Bookstores*, working paper (Harvard Business School, January 2020), accessed April 2025, https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/20-068_c19963e7-506c-479a-beb4-bb339cd293ee.pdf, 3.

reveals a critical gap in understanding their broader historical, cultural, and community significance.

Legacy used bookstores embody heritage values that newer retail models cannot easily replicate. Their densely layered inventories and affordable offerings create spaces of spontaneous exploration, where chance encounters with forgotten titles and conversations with knowledgeable owners foster intellectual curiosity and accessibility. Over decades, these shops have become community anchors and rare intergenerational gathering places, sustaining emotional continuity and informal knowledge exchange. The browsing experience itself—rooted in serendipity, personal connection, and a time-worn ambiance—constitutes a vital form of intangible cultural heritage.

This study uses the category of legacy used bookstores to apply and extend values-centered preservation theory, operationalizing definitions of intangible heritage and examining the policy landscape for legacy small businesses. It pursues three primary goals: (1) to trace the historical evolution of used bookstores in Philadelphia and the factors influencing their endurance or decline; (2) to identify and analyze the multiple heritage values—social, cultural, spatial, and economic—attached to legacy used bookstores; and (3) to propose preservation strategies that help legacy used bookstores resist excessive commercialization while sustaining their community relevance.

To ground this inquiry, the research focuses on Philadelphia as both a representative example and a distinctive urban context. Its remaining used bookstores face challenges common across U.S. cities, including rising rents, shifting consumer habits, and urban redevelopment pressures. Yet Philadelphia's deep literary history—

dating back to Franklin’s printshop in the early eighteenth century⁷—and its resilient communities of readers offer a particularly rich context for examining bookstore survival. Although rooted in one city, this study’s findings have broader applicability, informing preservation strategies not only for legacy used bookstores elsewhere but also for long-standing independent bookstores and other small businesses that serve as vital cultural infrastructure. By illuminating the value and vulnerabilities of these spaces, this research contributes to wider discussions on sustaining grassroots cultural heritage amid urban transformation.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method research design to investigate the cultural, historical, and community significance of legacy used bookstores in Philadelphia, framing them as forms of living heritage and developing preservation strategies informed by values-centered preservation theory. The research integrates archival investigation, spatial analysis, on-site observation, and semi-structured interviews centered around three detailed case studies. It applies a values-centered preservation framework to interpret how these bookstores embody diverse and layered forms of heritage significance. Values-centered preservation theory emphasizes identifying and protecting the multiple meanings and values that different communities ascribe to places, rather than relying solely on expert assessments or material attributes.⁸ By triangulating these methods and

⁷ Evan Friss, *The Bookshop: A History of the American Bookstore* (Viking, 2024), 75.

⁸ Erica C. Avrami, Randall Mason, and Marta De la Torre, “*Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report.*” (Getty Conservation Institute, 2000).

theoretical approaches, the study captures both the tangible and intangible heritage values embedded in these businesses, their evolving place within Philadelphia's urban fabric, and the preservation challenges they face amid shifting cultural and economic conditions.

Case Study Approach: Three legacy used bookstores in Philadelphia—two currently operating and one closed—were selected as case studies based on several criteria: longevity (over thirty years of operation), geographic location, community relevance, and a distinctive cultural or political identity. Each case study traces the bookstore's historical development, spatial characteristics, economic model, and ideological positioning, revealing varied pathways of adaptation and resilience. These stores illustrate how legacy used bookstores have navigated shifting urban conditions, including gentrification, declining foot traffic, and generational transitions, while sustaining their core missions and community roles. Drawing from these cases, the study identifies several broader durability strategies that may be applicable to similar businesses in other urban contexts.

Interviews and Participant Observation: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with bookstore owners and staff to document the lived experiences, values, and challenges associated with running and sustaining a legacy bookstore. These interviews explored themes such as ownership transitions, hidden stories, adaptation strategies, spatial curation philosophy, and interactions with changing neighborhoods. In addition, extended periods of participant observation were carried out at each site, focusing on the rhythms of daily operations, customer-storekeeper interactions, and the spatial and sensory atmosphere of the stores.

Mapping and Archival Research: Spatial analysis plays a central role in contextualizing the case studies within broader urban trends. Geographic data on Philadelphia’s used bookstores were compiled and visualized across three key time periods: 1990, 2010, and 2025. These maps trace the shifting distribution of secondhand bookshops in relation to neighborhood demographics, real estate pressures, and institutional anchors. The 2025 map builds on and revises Henry Crane’s 2023 illustrated map of city bookstores to produce a more historically grounded and economics-relevant spatial layer.⁹ In parallel, archival research was conducted using historic newspapers, business directories, and preservation records to reconstruct the evolution of Philadelphia’s independent book selling and used book trade, situating current cases within a longer trajectory of bookselling, redevelopment, and cultural resilience.¹⁰

Literature Review

This literature review is organized into three major sections: (1) Independent Bookstore Evolution, (2) Value-Centered Theory, and (3) Spatial Theory. The first section provides a national overview of the evolution of independent bookstores in the United States, synthesizing existing research on their historical development, decline, and recent resurgence. It highlights a critical gap in literature: while independent bookstores selling new books have been well-documented, the evolution and cultural significance of

⁹ Asha Prihar, “Locally Illustrated and Available for Free, the Philly Bookstore Map Showcases the City’s Thriving Scene,” *Billy Penn at WHYY*, June 22, 2023, <http://billypenn.com/2023/06/22/philadelphia-bookstore-map-art/>.

¹⁰ Key archival sources include *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (1878-2025), *Philadelphia Daily News* (1982–1989), *Philadelphia Yellow Pages* (1956-2016), and nomination forms and reports from the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

legacy used bookstores remain significantly underexplored. Building on this identified gap, the second and third sections engage with two bodies of theory that this study seeks to extend. The second section examines values-centered preservation theory, proposing that privately owned small businesses such as legacy used bookstores should be recognized as important cultural infrastructures within preservation frameworks. The third section draws on spatial theories of urban cultural landscapes to argue that small-scale commercial interiors also function as vital sites of community memory and social production. Together, these literatures frame the historical context, theoretical foundations, and research gaps of this study.

Independent Bookstore Evolution:

Independent bookstores have long been integral to the intellectual and cultural fabric of the United States, serving as vital hubs for educational and literary engagement. During the colonial era, these establishments were predominantly small, independently owned ventures catering to urban populations and communities near academic institutions.¹¹ The Moravian Book Shop, now part of Moravian College, is an interesting example of a bookstore launched during the colonial period. The bookstore, established by the Moravian Church in 1745 in Bethlehem, PA, is the oldest continuously operating bookstore in the U.S., and the second oldest bookstore in the world, providing books for members of the Moravian church and students at the college.¹²

¹¹ Clifford L. Snyder and John Tebbel, "A History of Book Publishing in the United States: Vol. I: The Creation of an Industry, 1630-1865," *The Journal of American History* 62, no. 3 (1975): 662–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2936225>.

¹² Steve Novak, "A Brief History of the Moravian Book Shop: Among the Oldest Bookstores in the World," *Lehighvalleylive.com*, May 2018, accessed March 2025, https://www.lehighvalleylive.com/bethlehem/2018/05/a_brief_history_of_the_moravia.html.

After the formation of the United States and through the early twentieth century, the number of bookstores remained relatively limited, with most operating as modest, small-scale businesses.¹³ From the 1930s to the 1950s, while the Great Depression initially stifled retail growth, the economic recovery and post-World War II boom ushered in increased consumer spending, including on books. This period saw a notable proliferation of independent bookstores, reflecting both the public's growing appetite for literature and the resilience of the book trade.¹⁴

By 1950, Manhattan alone boasted 386 bookstores, with nearly 40 concentrated along a six-block stretch of Fourth Avenue. This area became so synonymous with rare and antiquarian books that a *New York Times* article in 1969 declared, "What Lincoln Center is to music, what Broadway is to theater, Fourth Avenue is to rare, used and antiquarian books." However, the article also warned that rising rents threatened to bring this era to an end—a prediction that has unfortunately come true. Today, fewer than 100 bookstores remain in the entire city, a stark reminder of the dramatic shifts in the retail book industry over the decades.¹⁵

While rising rents have played a significant role in this decline, other factors have also contributed to the changing landscape of bookselling. For much of the country's history, the book trade was both disparaged for its inefficient and archaic business

¹³ Laura J. Miller, "Shopping for Community: The Transformation of the Bookstore into a Vital Community Institution," *Media, Culture & Society* 21, no. 3 (1999): 385–407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344399021003005>.

¹⁴ Snyder and Tebbel, "A History of Book Publishing," 662–63.

¹⁵ Tina Jordan and Erica Ackerberg, "Remembrance of Bookstores Past," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2022, accessed January 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/01/books/review/remembrance-of-bookstores-past.html>

methods and celebrated for offering a seemingly civilized alternative to the crass commercialism of most industries. But the conditions that gave rise to these competing evaluations began to be altered with the advent of the modern chain bookstore. A significant transformation began in the late 1970s with the creation of Crown Books by Robert Haft in 1977, which sparked the emergence of national bookstore chains such as Waldenbooks, Borders, and others. By the early 1980s, Waldenbooks was expanding rapidly, opening 80–90 stores annually and becoming the first chain with outlets in all 50 states.¹⁶

In 1971, Leonard Riggio acquired the Barnes & Noble flagship store in New York City and, through subsequent acquisitions, built it into a national chain. Alongside other chains like Borders and Books-a-Million, Barnes & Noble revolutionized book retailing by offering large inventories, attractive stores, and significant discounts. By 1997, Barnes & Noble and Borders reported revenues of \$2.796 billion and \$2.26 billion, respectively. This explosive growth of national chains had a detrimental effect on independent bookstores.¹⁷ From 1991 to 2001, the market share of independent bookstores in the consumer book market declined significantly, dropping from 33 percent to just 15 percent.¹⁸

¹⁶ Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*, 1st ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 18-21; Snyder and Tebbel, “A History of Book Publishing in the United States,” 622, 664.

¹⁷ Jim Milliot, “Tracking 20 Years of Bookstore Chains,” *Publishers Weekly*, August 2011, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/48473-tracking-20-years-of-bookstore-chains.html>.

¹⁸ David D. Kirkpatrick, “Smaller Bookstores End Court Struggle Against Two Chains,” *The New York Times*, April 2001, accessed January 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/20/business/smaller-bookstores-end-court-struggle-against-two-chains.html>

Following the rise of chain booksellers, three additional factors contributed to the further decline of independent bookstores. First, the launch of Amazon.com in 1994 revolutionized the retail landscape, with the company initially focusing on books before expanding into other products. By the 4th quarter of 2018, online sales accounted for \$158.482 billion, or 11.2% of U.S. retail sales, drastically altering consumer purchasing behaviors and negatively impacting traditional bookstores. Second, the Great Recession of 2007–2009 caused widespread economic hardship, reducing consumer spending, and forcing many bookstores to close as unemployment peaked at 10% and household net worth fell dramatically. Third, the introduction of e-readers, such as Amazon’s Kindle in 2007 and Apple’s iPad in 2010, significantly changed how Americans purchased and consumed books, driving the adoption of eBooks and audiobooks, which collectively reshaped the market. By 2018, trade book revenue from online channels grew by 7.1% to \$6.74 billion, further emphasizing the dominance of digital and online platforms in book retail. These factors compounded the challenges already faced by independent bookstores, accelerating their decline.¹⁹

Despite the challenges outlined above, independent booksellers experienced a remarkable and astonishing resurgence from 2009 to 2018.²⁰ Between 2009 and 2015, the number of independent bookstores grew by 35 percent.²¹ This resurgence attracted

¹⁹ Samaher Baidis et al., “Creating Competitive Advantage: The Growth of Independent Bookstores in the U.S. 2009–2018,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 670–84, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-019-09678-0>.

²⁰ Raffaelli, *The Novel Resurgence*, 4.

²¹ Lynn Neary, “Why the Number of Independent Bookstores Increased During the Retail Apocalypse,” *NPR*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/29/598053563/why-the-number-of-independent-bookstores-increased-during-the-retail-apocalypse>.

significant scholarly attention, with researchers examining how community-based brick-and-mortar retailers, particularly independent bookstores, achieved sustained market growth despite fierce competition from online and big-box retailers. These studies identified three key factors driving the revitalization of independent bookstores: community, curation, and convening.²²

By becoming integral parts of their local communities, hosting events, and supporting local authors, independent bookstores foster a sense of belonging that distinguishes them from impersonal online retailers. Their carefully curated selections, tailored to customers' preferences, provide a personalized shopping experience, and help readers discover unique titles. Additionally, independent bookstores serve as cultural hubs, offering spaces for book clubs, readings, and discussions, where people connect over shared interests. These strategies have allowed them to thrive despite intense competition from online giants like Amazon and big-box retailers.²³

In contrast, many chain booksellers, such as Borders, closed due to their inability to adapt to shifting consumer preferences and retail trends. The rise of e-commerce, particularly Amazon, significantly eroded chain bookstores' market share, as consumers increasingly favored the convenience, competitive pricing, and vast selection offered by online platforms. Additionally, large chain stores struggled with high overhead costs, including rents and operational expenses, making it challenging to compete with online retailers and the personalized, community-focused experience provided by independent bookstores. The closures of chain bookstores created a gap in the market, which

²² Raffaelli, *The Novel Resurgence*, 5.

²³ Raffaelli, *The Novel Resurgence*, 6.

independent bookstores were able to fill. Therefore, the independent bookstores “have returned to dance on the ashes of Borders and Waldenbooks”.²⁴

From 2018 to 2024, the number of independent bookstores has continued to grow.²⁵ However, this expansion has often coincided with the commercial displacement of many traditional and historical stores, which have been replaced by trendier establishments. While specific data on used bookstores is lacking, their sparse presence in city guide recommendations suggests they have been disproportionately affected.

Existing studies on the resurgence of independent bookstores largely focus on new-book sellers, emphasizing aesthetic trends and community activism, while overlooking the distinct challenges faced by used bookstores—particularly their vulnerability to urban redevelopment. Organizations such as the American Booksellers Association (ABA) also marginalize used bookstores; in Philadelphia, for instance, only one of thirteen operating used bookstores is affiliated with the ABA.²⁶ This study addresses these gaps by centering legacy used bookstores as vital yet neglected components of urban cultural infrastructure and tracing their distinct evolution within the broader history of independent bookselling in Philadelphia.

Value-Centered Theory:

To explore the cultural and historical significance of used bookstores, values-centered theory offers a powerful framework. This study presents an intriguing opportunity to test the theory in a practical and specialized context.

²⁴ Raffaelli, *The Novel Resurgence*, 9.

²⁵ Andrew W. Hait, “Do Not Turn the Page on Bookstores,” U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/12/do-not-turn-the-page-on-bookstores.html>.

²⁶ American Booksellers Association, “*Member Directory in Philadelphia.*”

The evolution of value-centered theory in heritage management plays a pivotal role in advancing the recognition of legacy used bookstores as important cultural assets. Historically, heritage conservation focused predominantly on material and architectural significance, overlooking the broader societal values that contribute to a place's importance. Over time, however, there has been a shift towards embracing cultural, social, and economic dimensions in heritage management. This evolution broadens the scope of preservation efforts, recognizing that safeguarding heritage goes beyond physical structures; it also involves protecting the cultural practices and social connections tied to those places.²⁷

One of the key reasons why this theoretical shift is crucial for legacy used bookstores is that it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their value. Beyond the physical space, these bookstores are repositories of cultural and economic processes, fostering community ties that are not easily quantifiable by traditional preservation standards. By acknowledging the cultural and social importance of these places, value-centered theory offers a justification for their protection, even when they do not meet conventional architectural criteria. This expanded interpretation of heritage values aligns with broader trends in heritage management, which increasingly prioritize community engagement and cultural continuity.

Value-centered theory, as advanced by scholars such as Mourato and Mazzanti, advocates for greater exploration of non-market values in economic evaluation. The value of legacy used bookstores extends beyond conventional metrics like GDP contribution or

²⁷ Avrami, Mason, and De la Torre, *Values and Heritage Conservation: Research Report*.

job creation. These businesses offer existence value (people value their existence in the community regardless of the shopping behaviors), option value (the potential for future use), and bequest value (the desire to preserve them for future generations).²⁸ These non-market values underscore the role that legacy bookstores play in preserving cultural and intellectual diversity, even if their immediate economic contribution is not substantial.

Theresa Satterfield further reinforces the need for a more nuanced approach to valuing heritage. Satterfield critiques traditional valuation methods for their inability to capture deeply held moral, emotional, and cultural connections to heritage sites. These methods often marginalize intangible values, leading to a kind of “numbness” in how people articulate their attachment to cultural assets.²⁹ For legacy used bookstores, this presents a significant challenge: just as environmental resources can be undervalued when assessed purely in economic terms, the cultural significance of used bookstores may be similarly overlooked. Satterfield advocates for participatory, narrative-driven methods that provide a more holistic understanding of values. For the preservation of legacy bookstores, such methods would allow communities to articulate the full range of cultural, historical, and emotional significance these spaces hold.

Value-centered theory also demonstrates its practical viability in local business cases, with the Main Street Approach serving as a notable example. This approach prioritizes sustainable cultural and economic development over the mere preservation of

²⁸ Susana Mourato and Massimiliano Mazzanti, *Economic Valuation of Cultural Heritage: Evidence and Prospects* (Getty Conservation Institute, 2002), 51.

²⁹ Theresa Satterfield, *Numbness and Sensitivity in the Elicitation of Environmental Values*, in *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions*, ed. Erica Avrami (Getty Conservation Institute, 2019), 12.

physical structures. By integrating heritage elements into comprehensive economic strategies, it seeks to revitalize downtown areas and neighborhood commercial districts. Through the strategic use of cultural and historical assets, the Main Street program stimulates local economic growth, fosters community engagement, and cultivates a shared sense of place. This methodology shifts the focus from simply conserving buildings to acknowledging the dynamic relationship between heritage and economic vitality. It aligns with contemporary trends in heritage management, which increasingly emphasize the holistic integration of cultural, social, and economic dimensions in preservation efforts.³⁰

The existing scholarship on values-centered preservation has firmly established the importance of cultural and non-market values but remains largely concentrated on historic sites, landscapes, and architectural monuments. This study pushes the theory forward by extending it to small-scale, semi-private commercial spaces—specifically, legacy used bookstores—which have been largely absent from heritage discourses. By foregrounding the everyday economic and cultural practices embedded in these businesses—such as acquiring, displaying, and circulating secondhand books—this study explores the convergence of cultural and economic processes in ways that have been underexamined.

Although practical frameworks like the Main Street Approach have demonstrated the importance of sustaining local businesses for community vitality, they largely operate at the neighborhood or corridor scale. Building on this recognition but moving beyond it,

³⁰ Emily Talen and Hyesun Jeong, “What Is the Value of ‘Main Street’? Framing and Testing the Arguments,” *Cities* 92 (2019): 208–18, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.03.023>.

this study examines the preservation of a specific category of small businesses—legacy used bookstores—across the broader urban fabric of Philadelphia. By shifting the scale of inquiry from commercial districts to a citywide perspective, the research contributes to values centered preservation theory by demonstrating that cultural and economic heritage processes operate across multiple spatial and temporal dimensions. In doing so, it proposes a more dynamic and integrated understanding of living cultural infrastructure within contemporary urban environments.

Spatial Theories:

Concepts such as “third space” and “placemaking” offer crucial frameworks for understanding how used bookstores function as dynamic cultural and social environments. “Third space,” as theorized by Ray Oldenburg, refers to informal communal spaces outside of home and work where individuals gather, interact, and build social bonds.³¹ Used bookstores, with their spontaneous browsing experiences and opportunities for intergenerational exchange, embody many of the characteristics of third spaces, serving as vital nodes of community memory and intellectual life. Meanwhile, the concept of “placemaking” emphasizes how artistic, cultural, and economic activities catalyze the transformation of physical spaces, fostering distinctive community identities and strengthening social and economic vitality.³² Legacy used bookstores contribute to placemaking not only through their distinctive spatial layouts and curated inventories but

³¹ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 1st ed. (Marlowe & Co, 1999), 20-22.

³² Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2010), 3-4.

also through the everyday practices of book trading, browsing, and conversation that foster a sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

The interior atmosphere of bookstores contributes significantly to their intangible cultural value. Bookstores often evoke a sense of home, with their cozy, overstuffed chairs, soft lighting, and piles of books resembling living room settings. This domestic familiarity reinforces the bookstore's role as a nurturing space for community and culture.³³ Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett underscore that bookstores, like cafés and community centers, serve as alternative public spaces that facilitate social interaction, creativity, and inclusivity by minimizing hierarchies.³⁴ As a distinct type of bookstore, used bookstores are particularly associated with more crowded, layered, and unpredictable environments. Unlike the orderly organization of chain bookstores, used bookstores often embrace a dense, semi-chaotic spatial arrangement that encourages “wandering” and “hunting,” fostering exploration and serendipitous discovery. While the customer may struggle to decipher the store's organizational logic, the bookseller often maintains a deep personal knowledge of the inventory, enhancing the customer's experience through direct conversation and informal guidance.³⁵ These tactile, improvisational interactions reinforce the sense of intimacy and community that defines the used bookstore experience.

Another key discussion revolves around the inherent instinct of collection within used bookstores. These spaces function not only as retail environments but also as

³³ Jorge Carrión, *Bookshops: A Reader's History*, (MacLehose Press, 2016), 50-55.

³⁴ Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett, “The Third Place,” *Qualitative Sociology* 5, no. 4 (December 1, 1982): 265–284, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00986754>.

³⁵ Highland, *The Spaces of Bookselling*.

atmospheres of collection. The statement “booksellers and acquirers are collectors who browse, seek, and hunt” refers to the active, layered process of engaging with books in secondhand bookstores.³⁶ Both sellers and buyers are motivated by a shared passion for discovery and collection, where the act of finding books satisfies both personal desires and broader cultural purposes. Walter Benjamin deepens this idea by describing collectors as people with “tactile instincts,” emphasizing the physical and emotional connection they have with the objects they collect. According to Benjamin, bibliophiles—those who collect and love books—are unique because they do not “withdraw their treasures from their functional context.”³⁷ Unlike other types of collectors, who might hide or display their collections without further use, bibliophiles keep their books in circulation, continuing to read, appreciate, and share them. In this sense, the books remain active and retain their original purpose, distinguishing bibliophiles and secondhand booksellers from collectors who view their possessions solely as aesthetic or symbolic objects. This dynamic of ongoing engagement is central to the unique atmosphere of used bookstores, where the collection is not static but alive, constantly being interacted with and reshaped by those who participate in the experience.

Retail bookselling, beyond its interior qualities, is a multifaceted practice encompassing economic, political, and spatial dimensions. It occurs in physical stores, on streets, and through media like catalogues and newspapers. These spaces are not passive backdrops but actively shape behaviors, relationships, and meanings; bookselling itself

³⁶ Alison B. Snyder, “The Interior World of Books, Browsing, and Collecting Inside the City,” *Interiority*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7454/in.v4i1.114>.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 60.

transforms these spaces by redefining values around community, leisure, and reading.³⁸ As Mark Paterson asserts, “It’s not just what we do but where we do it,” underscoring that the spatial context influences cultural activities.³⁹ Used bookstores, through their layered, often labyrinthine interior spaces, offer unique browsing experiences that differ sharply from the orderly layouts of chain bookstores. Customers navigate crowded aisles, dig through piles, and engage directly with knowledgeable owners, creating an atmosphere of spontaneous discovery and informal knowledge exchange. This distinctive spatial logic encourages wandering, hunting, and serendipitous encounters with forgotten titles, reinforcing the bookstore’s role as a living archive and community hub.

Spatial theorists provide deeper insight into how such spaces are socially and culturally produced. Michel de Certeau’s concept of “practiced place” emphasizes that space becomes meaningful only through human activity; places like used bookstores are animated by the interactions of owners, patrons, and communities.⁴ The Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) model, drawn from game design theory, offers another lens for understanding how spatial structures (mechanics) enable dynamic interactions like browsing and conversation, ultimately producing an aesthetic experience that carries emotional and cultural resonance.⁴⁰ Huw Osborne challenges the simplistic binary between commerce and culture often used to discuss bookstores, instead framing them as “counter-spaces” where commercial imperatives and cultural values intersect and co-

³⁸ Highland, *The Spaces of Bookselling*.

³⁹ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 99.

⁴⁰ Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek, “MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research,” paper presented at the Challenges in Game AI Workshop, 19th National Conference on Artificial Intelligence (AAAI-04), 2004.

construct meaning.⁴¹ Bookstores' alignment with countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s further illustrates how they served as sites of political dissent, intellectual freedom, and community-building during moments of broader societal transformation.

Beyond their interior organization, the geographic location of used bookstores across the urban landscape critically shapes their heritage value. Historically, legacy bookstores clustered around central business districts and culturally vibrant corridors, benefiting from dense foot traffic and proximity to intellectual communities. A notable example is New York City's historic "Book Row," a six-block stretch along Fourth Avenue that once hosted more than 40 secondhand and antiquarian bookstores during the early to mid-twentieth century.⁴² Book Row thrived by embedding itself within the city's literary and educational networks but ultimately succumbed to rising rents and redevelopment pressures, leading to the near-total displacement of its stores by the 1960s. Philadelphia's used bookstores have faced similar vulnerabilities, with mapping their shifting locations over time revealing patterns of displacement, relocation, and survival strategies. Studies in urban cultural geography emphasize that place-based heritage emerges not merely from individual sites but through embeddedness in broader social, economic, and symbolic networks.⁴³ In this sense, a bookstore's location actively

⁴¹ Huw Edwin Osborne, *The Rise of the Modernist Bookshop - Books and the Commerce of Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Routledge, 2016), 131.

⁴² Stephen J. Gertz, *Book Row: An Anecdotal and Pictorial History of the Antiquarian Book Trade* (Oak Knoll Press, 2004), 1- 4.

⁴³ David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (Oxford University Press, 1996), chapter 4.

participates in shaping its cultural meaning, visibility, and resilience, making spatial positioning a crucial dimension of their heritage significance.

This study contributes to spatial theories of heritage by extending the analysis beyond individual interior spaces to consider the citywide cultural infrastructure formed by legacy used bookstores. While previous research has illuminated how bookstores operate as third places and sites of placemaking, few studies have connected their internal spatial logics to broader urban geographies. By situating used bookstores within Philadelphia's evolving cultural and economic landscapes, this research proposes a multi-scalar framework for heritage analysis: one that links the intimate, tactile practices of browsing with the macro-forces of urban transformation. In doing so, it pushes spatial theories of heritage to better account for the mobility, vulnerability, and resilience strategies of small, community-rooted businesses in contemporary cities.

1 From Boom to Legacy: How Philadelphia's Literary Landscape Shaped Its Used Bookstores

This section provides a historical and spatial foundation for understanding the evolution of Philadelphia's independent and used bookstores. It moves beyond a straightforward chronology by comparing the trajectories of independent bookstores and secondhand bookstores, highlighting where their paths overlapped and where they diverged. Through this comparison, it examines how different economic, cultural, and social forces contributed to the expansion and decline of each sector, with attention to the distinct causes of bookstore closures across different historical periods. In addition to tracing temporal patterns, this chapter also incorporates a spatial analysis of how used

bookstores were distributed across Philadelphia’s urban landscape. It examines how shifting geographic concentrations—such as those in Center City—initially supported but eventually challenged the survival of these businesses. Together, this historical and spatial analysis establishes the groundwork for understanding the unique vulnerabilities and heritage values of Philadelphia’s legacy used bookstores today.

1.1 Early 18th–Early 19th Century: From Printshop Counters to the Book Trade

In the early stages of the American book trade—from the early 18th to early 19th century—bookselling operated within a fluid, multifunctional system. The national market was still modest: few homes contained books, and dedicated bookshops were rare. Most readers, publishers, and printers were concentrated in the Northeast, especially in New York and Philadelphia. The term “bookstore” had not yet fully crystallized, and there was little distinction between new and used book sales.⁴⁴ Sellers often wore multiple hats—functioning as printers, publishers, importers, and stationers. Inventory typically combined locally printed texts, imported European titles, and previously owned volumes, reflecting a culture grounded more in circulation than consumption.⁴⁵

In Philadelphia, then a leading hub of printing, this hybridity was especially pronounced. Bookselling was not yet a standalone profession but part of a broader ecosystem of civic, commercial, and intellectual activity. Figures such as William Bradford (1663–1752), Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), Thomas Dobson (1751–1823), and Mathew Carey (1760–1839) simultaneously operated as booksellers, publishers,

⁴⁴ Evan Friss, *The Bookshop : A History of the American Bookstore* (Viking, 2024), 38.

⁴⁵ Ann K. Johnson, “Bookselling,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2016, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/bookselling/>.

editors, and postmasters. Retail sales of books and pamphlets often funded their wider printing ventures.⁴⁶ Among them, Franklin stands out not only as a founding father but as a formative figure in the American book trade. In 1728, he opened his Philadelphia printshop, later known as The New Printing-Office, which became a bustling hub for printing, selling, and exchanging ideas. He sold books wholesale and retail, ran a newspaper, managed the post office, imported paper and titles, and helped establish subscription libraries. His shop resembled a workshop more than a modern bookstore: filled with drying pages, ink barrels, and stacks of printed matter, serving teachers, ministers, and curious citizens alike.⁴⁷

During the 18th century, most inventory was still imported, with religious texts, schoolbooks, and almanacs among the bestsellers. Booksellers supplemented these with stationery, maps, broadsides, and political pamphlets to serve a growing literate public—especially professionals, clergy, and the middle class. Franklin’s collaboration with other booksellers, like James Read and Sarah Harwood Read, also reflects the collegial, networked nature of the early trade. By the 1740s, stores gradually carried authors like Swift, Milton, Locke, and Shakespeare, catering to the expanding tastes of the colonial elite. Though the term “bookstore” would not appear in print until 1760, in an advertisement by James Rivington, Philadelphia had already laid the foundation for a vibrant literary economy where publishing, commerce, and public discourse intertwined.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

⁴⁷ Friss, *The Bookshop*, 15.

⁴⁸ Friss, *The Bookshop*, 26-28.

This early fusion of printing and bookselling did more than circulate texts—it cultivated the civic imagination. As historian Evan Friss writes, “Books hold ideas. Ideas hold power.” Booksellers were quiet agents of what Franklin called “public liberty,” shaping what colonists read, believed, and ultimately how they acted.⁴⁹ In Philadelphia, the bookstore was never merely a site of commerce—it was a stage for revolution.

1.2 19th Century: The Rise of the Bookstall and the Streets as Literary Space

By the mid-19th century, the American book trade was undergoing a visible transformation. Beyond formal bookstores and publishing houses, a vibrant and informal resale economy had begun to emerge—visible in the figures of wandering peddlers, auctioneers, and street-side booksellers. In cities and small towns alike, book buying was no longer confined to the upper classes or to the counter of a printer-bookseller. It was spilling into public space, democratizing access through cheap reprints, religious tracts, schoolbooks, and discarded volumes. In New England, itinerant booksellers crisscrossed the countryside, hawking books out of carts and baskets.⁵⁰

In Philadelphia, this transformation took on a distinct and decentralized form. Rather than coalescing into a single booksellers’ row like New York’s Fourth Avenue since 1890s, Philadelphia’s bookstalls emerged as scattered but vibrant outposts of literary commerce. Stalls and sidewalk tables cropped up at key intersections and commercial corridors, including Sixth and Chestnut, Eighth and Chestnut, Tenth and

⁴⁹ Friss, *The Bookshop*, 32.

⁵⁰ Friss, *The Bookshop*, 63-64.

Market, Third and Germantown Road, and Ninth Street. These spaces were neither purely commercial nor purely intellectual—they were crossroads of culture, economy, and eccentricity.⁵¹

Each bookseller brought their own flavor to the trade. At Sixth and Chestnut, Tom Lynch was a beloved figure whose stall became a fixture of the block, remembered by locals for its constant presence and fluttering pages. A few blocks away, at Eighth and Chestnut, Aston's long row of stalls was both a magnet for cheap literature and a proving ground for young readers—under the sharp eye of a gruff proprietor quick to chastise anyone who lingered too long without buying. Hugh Hammill, at Tenth and Market, is said to have operated a stall for years despite being unable to read, a striking symbol of the trade's accessibility and the diverse paths people took into the business. Meanwhile, Watts, a bookseller on Third Street near Germantown Road, brought a unique flair to his stall, combining book dealing with what he believed to be therapeutic spinal manipulation—offering cures for chronic ailments while selling astrological tracts and dream books.⁵²

Economically, the secondhand book trade was both resilient and speculative. While it lacked the polish and prestige of antiquarian dealerships, it offered steady margins: dealers routinely earned three to five times their investment on individual books or lots. Profit margins were modest on cheap stock, but the low overhead of the stall—

⁵¹ “About Second Hand Books,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 15, 1878.

⁵² “About Second Hand Books.”

and the occasional windfall of a valuable title—made it an attractive venture for entrepreneurial spirits.⁵³

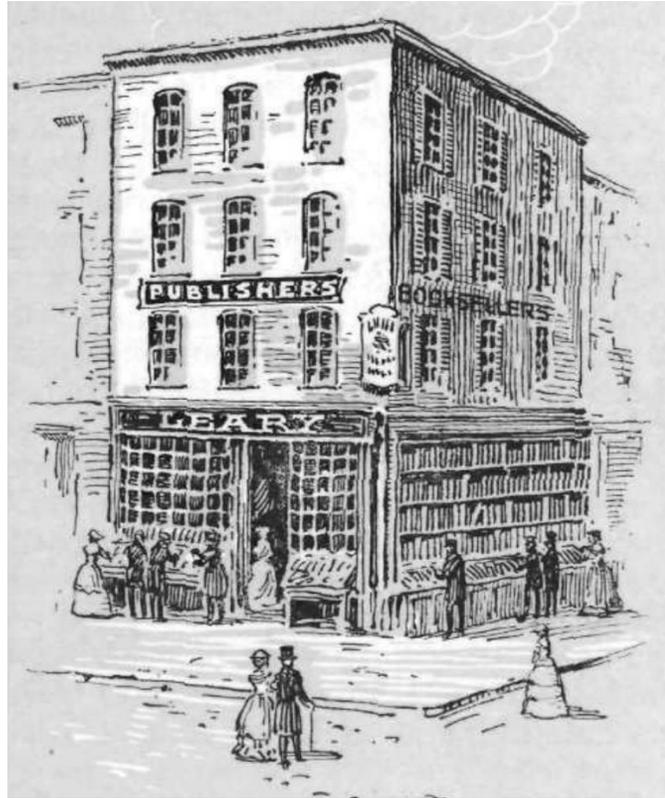


Figure 1.1: Illustration of Leary's Bookstore at the Southeast Corner of Fifth and Walnut Streets (1868–1877).

Source: Joseph Jackson, *An Old Landmark: A Famous Book Store*, illus. William Mohr, 13.

Yet even as some bookstalls transitioned into more formal shops, like the Leary's Bookstore, the aesthetics and ethos of the stall remained.⁵⁴ Many established stores continued to use outdoor tables and bargain carts, recognizing their power to draw passersby into the tactile, serendipitous world of secondhand books (Figure 1.1). These spaces—part shopfront, part street theater—offered Philadelphians not only affordable

⁵³ “About Second Hand Books.”

⁵⁴ Joseph Jackson, *An Old Landmark: A Famous Book Store*, (Hagley Digital Archives, 1920), 15, https://digital.hagley.org/08033509_old_landmark.

access to literature but an enduring public relationship with the written word. Bookstalls, in this sense, were not just transitional spaces between print and public; they were civic portals, where books moved not only between owners, but into lives.

1.3 Mid-19th – Mid 20th Century: Leary’s bookstore and the Golden Age of Center City Bookselling

Bookstores flourished in Mid-19th century Philadelphia, driven by rising literacy rates, expanding public education, and a growing belief in reading as a tool for self-improvement. Educational reforms, especially the Common School Movement, helped transform books from elite commodities into widely accessible resources, fueling demand among middle- and working-class readers. As technological advances like steam-powered presses and cheaper paper led to a surge in book production, bookselling gradually emerged as a distinct profession, separate from printing and publishing.⁵⁵

Many bookstores clustered in Center City, benefiting from dense foot traffic, proximity to schools, libraries, and civic institutions, and easy access to wholesale printers and publishers.⁵⁶ This centralization shaped a vibrant literary district and gave rise to a thriving secondhand book market. It was in this context that Leary’s Book Store—founded in 1836 by Maryland-born William A. Leary—found its niche, quickly growing into one of the city’s most beloved and enduring literary institutions.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

⁵⁶ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

⁵⁷ Jeff Nilsson, “Late, Great American Bookstores: Leary’s Books,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 25, 2011, accessed March 2025. <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2011/02/late-great-american-bookstores-learys-books/>.

1.3.1 Leary's Bookstore (1836-1969)

In 1836, Leary's Bookstore began humbly as a sidewalk bookstall at 144 North Second Street, next to the famed Camel Tavern. Leary, then in his twenties, sold books directly to marketgoers, gradually expanding his inventory and eventually moving into a full building at the corner of New Street. For nearly a decade, Leary operated from this location, publishing and selling popular works such as *Buchan's Family Physician* and *Peterson's Military Heroes of the Revolution*, books that enjoyed remarkable reach and popularity.⁵⁸

In 1865, Leary's son, William A. Leary Jr., took over the business. By 1868, he relocated the store to Fifth and Walnut Streets, then the civic and legal hub of Philadelphia. There, a young jobseeker named Edwin S. Stuart answered an advertisement for help and quickly distinguished himself through his diligence and affinity for books. When Leary Jr.'s health declined, Stuart was entrusted with managing the store. He officially acquired the business on January 1, 1876, continuing to operate under the well-known Leary's name.⁵⁹

Recognizing shifts in the city's geography and development, Stuart made a strategic decision to relocate again. With the new City Hall under construction at Broad and Market, and a new Federal Post Office planned nearby, he purchased a property at 9 South Ninth Street, formerly home to T.J. Perkins & Co (Figure 1.2). In September 1877,

⁵⁸ Jackson, *An Old Landmark: A Famous Book Store*, 13.

⁵⁹ Jackson, *An Old Landmark: A Famous Book Store*, 18-19.

Leary's reopened at this location, where it would become a Philadelphia landmark for nearly a century.⁶⁰

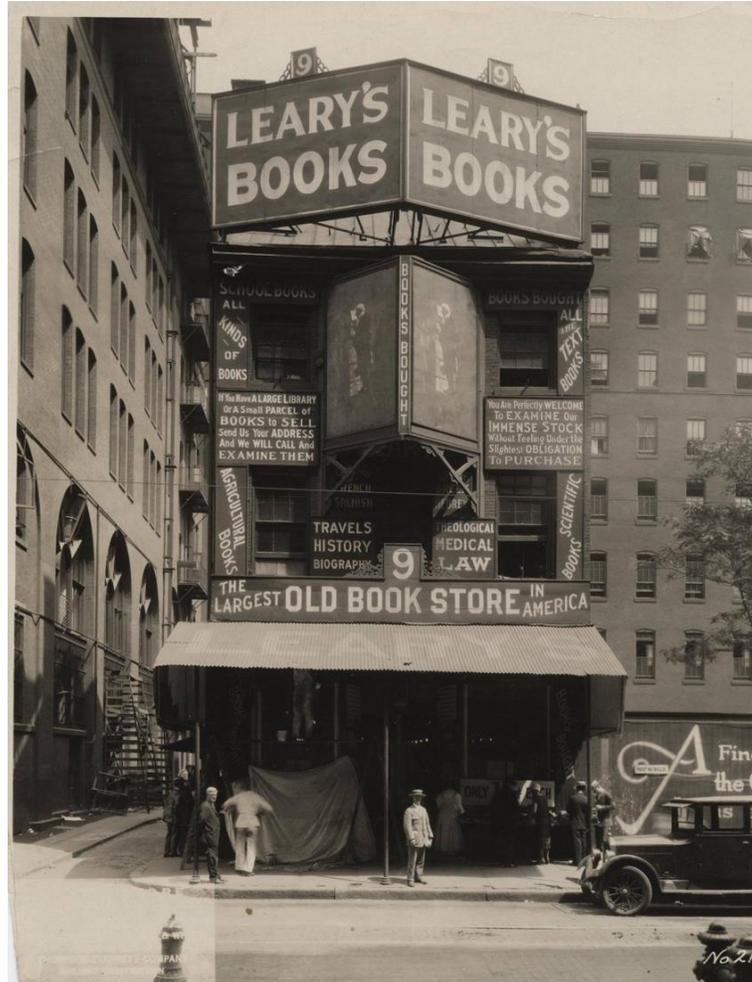


Figure 1.2: Leary's Bookstore at 9 S. Ninth Street, circa 1910.

Source: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center.

Between 1920 and 1938, Leary's Bookstore underwent a major transformation, expanding from a four-story townhouse into a seven-story building to accommodate its growing inventory, while the Gimbel Brothers Department Store had filled the remainder of the block fronting Chestnut Street by 1927 (Figure 1.3). The store's iconic sign—

⁶⁰ Jackson, *An Old Landmark: A Famous Book Store*, 15–25.

depicting an elderly man perched atop a ladder with an armful of books—became a lasting symbol of Philadelphia’s literary culture (Figure 1.4a).⁶¹

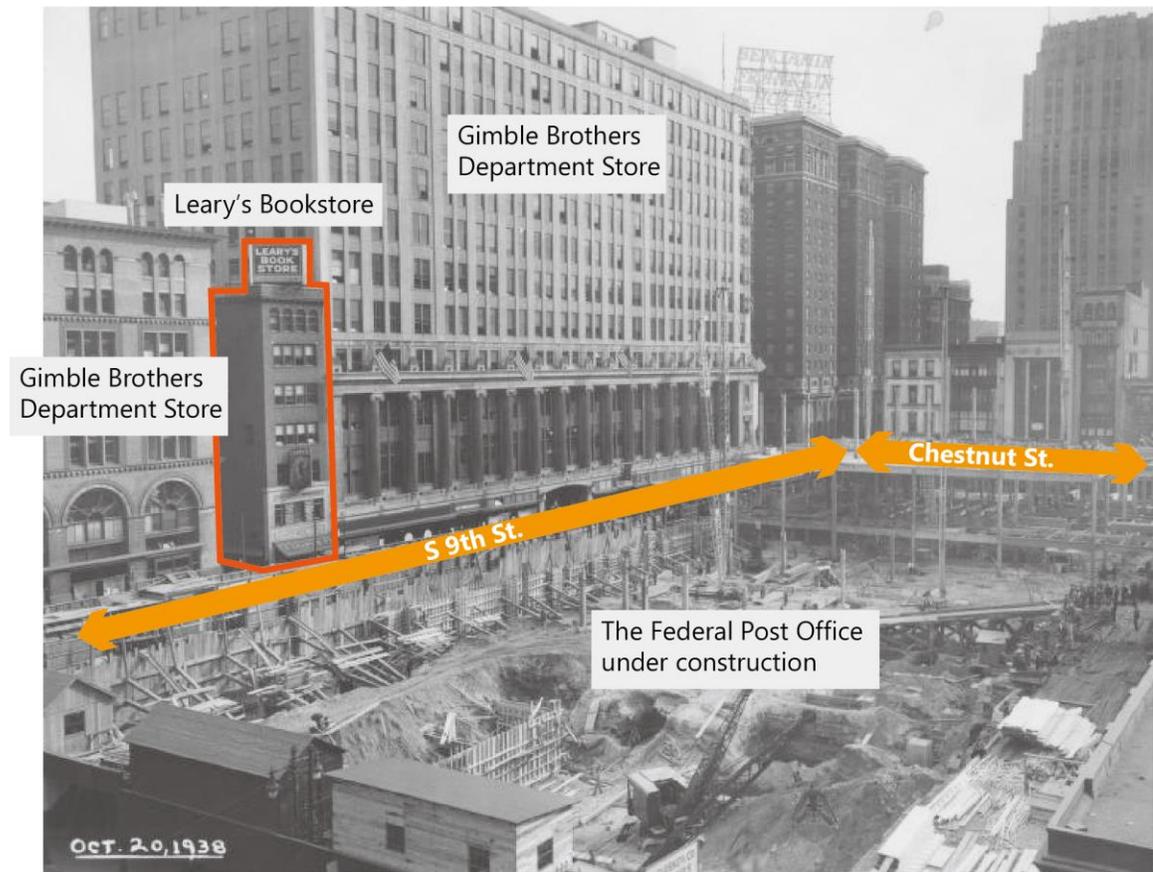


Figure 1.3: Leary’s Bookstore at 9 S. Ninth Street alongside the Gimbel Brothers Department Store and the adjacent Federal Post Office construction site, circa 1938.

Source: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center. Photo annotated by the author.

⁶¹ Nicholas Phillippi, “The Gilded Mall Of Market Street: Gimbels Had It,” *Hidden City Philadelphia*, November 24, 2014, <https://hiddencityphila.org/2014/11/the-gilded-mall-of-market-street-gimbels-had-it/>.



Figure 1.4: Views of Leary's Bookstore at 9 S. Ninth Street, Philadelphia, circa 1968. (a) Exterior façade showing the prominent bookstore sign and street activity. (b) Customers waiting in line at the checkout counter. (c) Extensive secondhand book collections and specialty sections, including poetry and maps. Source: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center.

By the mid-20th century, Leary's was selling nearly 40,000 books a week, firmly establishing itself as a haven for readers, collectors, and curious browsers (Figure 1.4).

Writer Christopher Morley was so enamored with the store that he used it as the inspiration for his 1919 mystery novel *The Haunted Book Shop*. In a 1949 article for *The Saturday Evening Post*, Leary's was described as a "house of a million books"—It was old, dark, dusty, cluttered, and staffed by silent, reserved salespeople.⁶²

However, by the mid-20th century, Leary's faced increasing difficulty in acquiring a sufficient supply of salable used books—the very inventory that had sustained

⁶² Nilsson, "Late, Great American Bookstores: Leary's Books."

its vast, 7-story operation. Rising rents and urban redevelopment made it harder to maintain such a large footprint in Center City, while changing consumer habits favored newer, more streamlined retail experiences, including neighborhood bookstores and mail-order services.⁶³ Though beloved by generations of Philadelphians, Leary's ultimately could not adapt its old-world model to the rapidly modernizing book trade, and with no viable path to profitability, the store quietly shuttered in 1969 after more than 130 years in business which means the end of large-scale secondhand bookselling in Philadelphia.⁶⁴

Today, it is virtually impossible to find another secondhand bookstore of Leary's immense scale anywhere in the country. While that physical scale has disappeared, the distinctive atmosphere of quiet exploration it cultivated lives on in the surviving used bookstores of Philadelphia. A sign once displayed on Leary's façade read: "You are perfectly welcome to examine our immense stock without feeling under the slightest obligation to purchase. (Figure 1.2)" Even its staff were trained to remain silent unless addressed, reinforcing a space where readers could wander undisturbed.⁶⁵ That spirit—a reverence for solitary discovery, for browsing without pressure—continues to shape the character of the city's legacy bookshops, long after Leary's itself closed its doors in 1968.

⁶³ Steven G. Neal, "A Bibliophile's Guide to the Yellowed Pages," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 11, 1973.

⁶⁴ Nilsson, "Late, Great American Bookstores: Leary's Books."

⁶⁵ Nilsson, "Late, Great American Bookstores: Leary's Books."

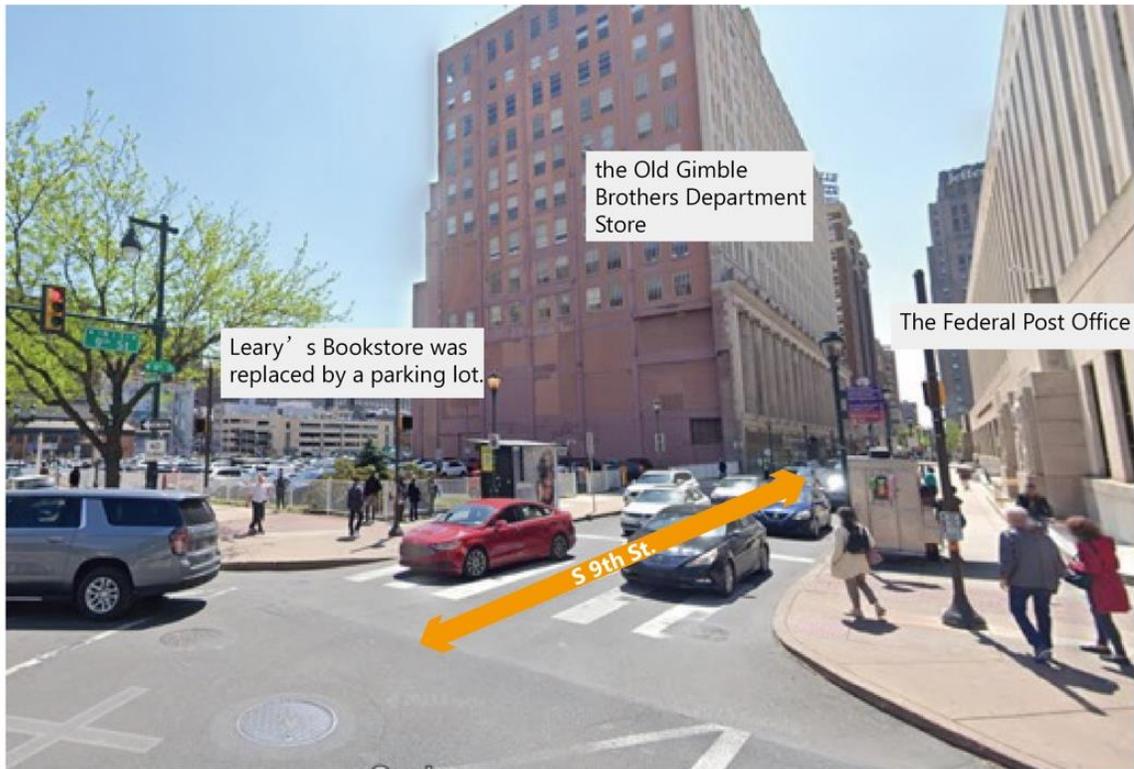


Figure 1.5: The intersection of Market Street and South 9th Street, 2025.
Source: Google Street View. Photo annotated by the author.

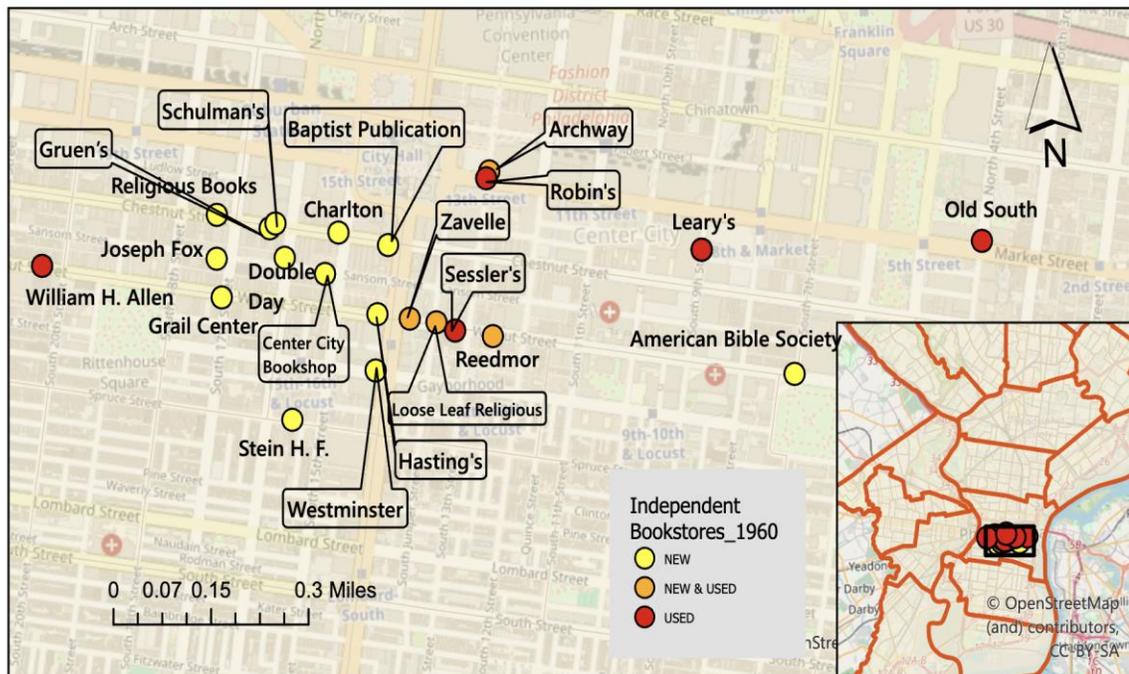
The original Gimbel Brothers Department Store building was demolished in 1979, except for its 1927 addition, which was preserved and converted into professional office space. Leary’s Bookstore was fully demolished following its closure in 1969, and the former bookstore site—along with surrounding structures—was replaced by a surface parking lot (Figure 1.5).⁶⁶

1.3.2 The Golden Age of Center City Bookselling

By the 1950s, the Booksellers’ Association of Philadelphia boasted approximately 250 members, reflecting a broad and diverse network of book-related businesses that

⁶⁶ Phillippi, “The Gilded Mall Of Market Street: Gimbels Had It.”

spanned the city.⁶⁷ In 1960, at least 25 independent bookstores—including both new-book and secondhand bookstores—operated in the Center City area, with many clustered around City Hall, as shown in Map 1.1.⁶⁸ Nine of these were primarily selling secondhand bookstores, reflecting Philadelphia’s growing appetite for affordable reading material amid economic hardship and social change in the wake of the Great Depression and two world wars.



Map 1.1: Independent bookstores in Center City, Philadelphia in around 1960. Map created by the author.

Together, these bookstores created a vibrant literary corridor—a dense and diverse ecosystem ranging from towering retail landmarks to tucked-away neighborhood shops. Leary’s Bookstore, with its seven-story operation and immense inventory, served as the symbolic anchor of this world.

⁶⁷ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

⁶⁸ The Bell Telephone Company of Pennsylvania, *Philadelphia Yellow Pages*, 1956, Library of Congress, accessed April 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/item/usteledirec08122/>.



Figure 1.6: A ghost sign with a large arrow pointing the way to Reedmor Books at 1220 Walnut Street, 2022.

Source: Hidden City Philadelphia

Some smaller scale used bookstores demonstrated greater longevity than Leary's, which closed in 1969. One example was Reedmor Books, a now-forgotten but once-thriving used bookstore located at 1220 Walnut St. Founded in the early 20th century, Reedmor was known for its deep selection of used and rare books, along with its imposing hand-painted sign that once loomed over Walnut St. traffic. Like Leary's, it catered to a wide cross-section of Philadelphians—students, collectors, and browsers alike—but on a smaller, more personal scale. Its visibility and character were so strong that even decades after its closure, its “Reedmor Books” ghost sign remained a familiar

marker in the cityscape (Figure 1.6), recently highlighted in *Hidden City Philadelphia* as one of the last remnants of the area’s bookselling past.⁶⁹

Robin’s Bookstore, a new and used bookstore, founded in 1936, carved out a distinct identity by specializing in political literature and progressive titles, appealing to a niche but loyal readership that valued depth over breadth.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Sessler’s Bookshop, a used bookstore, established in 1906, maintained a more modest general inventory but benefited from a curated, antiquarian approach that required less floor space and stock volume than Leary’s sprawling model.⁷¹

These bookstores were better suited to Philadelphia’s evolving urban environment during the 20th century: with smaller footprints, lower overhead, and more flexible inventories, they could adjust more easily to rising rents, changing tastes, and new retail dynamics. Unlike Leary’s broad, mass-market appeal, their survival relied on cultivating specialized communities of readers—a strategy that proved more resilient amid the pressures of urban redevelopment and industry consolidation. However, this model would soon face a new set of challenges with the arrival of chain bookstores and, later, the rise of online retail. The trajectory of Robin’s Bookstore—including its adaptations and eventual closure—will be examined in greater detail in the case study chapter (Case Study).

⁶⁹ “Ghost Signs of Philadelphia: Reedmor Books in Center City,” *Hidden City Philadelphia*, June 7, 2022, <https://hiddencityphila.org/2022/06/ghost-signs-of-philadelphia-reedmor-books-in-center-city/>.

⁷⁰ Naveed Ahsan, “Robin’s Reaches Final Chapter”, *The Temple News*, January 22, 2013, accessed January 2025, <https://temple-news.com/robins-reaches-final-chapter/>.

⁷¹ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

1.4 The 1960s- 1970s: Counterculture Movement and The Rise of Specialized and Radical Bookstores

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an explosion of specialized and radical bookstores that aligned themselves with the era’s social movements—from civil rights and Black liberation to feminism, anti-war activism, and queer rights.⁷² As these social movements gained momentum, the city’s bookstore landscape evolved in tandem, giving rise to a new generation of shops that served not just as places to buy books but as vital spaces for resistance, identity formation, and collective engagement. Joshua Clark Davis, a historian at the University of Baltimore, describes these “activist bookstores” as places where the mission often outweighed the profit motive: they promoted social movements through the books and materials they offered, provided gathering spaces for seasoned organizers and curious newcomers alike, and structured their business practices around the broader goal of societal change rather than financial gain.⁷³

Among these, Hakim’s Bookstore, founded in the late 1950s by Dawud Hakim at 210 S 52nd St. in West Philadelphia, stands as a pioneering example (Figure 1.7). Originally launched to promote knowledge of African and African American history, Hakim’s quickly evolved into a central institution for Black intellectual life in Philadelphia. It stocked hard-to-find texts on Black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and African heritage, becoming a crucial source of education and empowerment during the civil rights and Black Power eras. More than a bookstore, Hakim’s served as a gathering space for generations of activists, educators, and community members—anchoring a local tradition of self-determined knowledge-sharing.

⁷² Johnson, “Bookselling.”

⁷³ Claire Wang, “The Rise of Bookstores With a Social Mission,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2024, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/10/books/counterculture-bookstores-social-movements.html>.

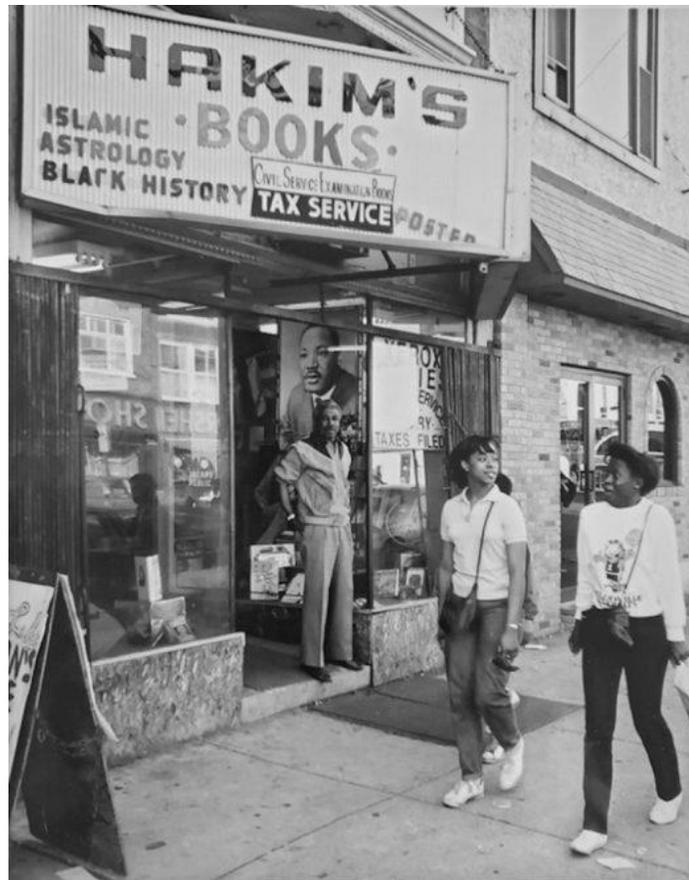


Figure 1.7: Dawud Abdel Hakim standing in the doorway of his bookstore, circa 1980s.

Photo courtesy of Hakim's Bookstore and Gift Shop.

This grassroots energy extended throughout West Philadelphia at that time. The New World Book Fair, opened in 1961 at 113 S. 40th Street by William H. Crawford, specialized in Marxist and African American literature, becoming a gathering space for local organizers, educators, and political thinkers.⁷⁴ Nearby, House of Our Own, founded in 1971 at 3920 Spruce Street, operated as both a radical used bookstore and a community hub. Located near the University of Pennsylvania, it stood in contrast to the university bookstore's more academic and commercially oriented bookstore, offering

⁷⁴ Rusty Pray, "William Crawford, Former Bookshop Owner," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 10, 2002.

instead an open, informal atmosphere rooted in progressive politics, activism, and a passion for transformative ideas.⁷⁵ Its evolution and spatial dynamics are examined in greater detail in the case study chapter (Case Study).

Meanwhile, in Center City, a parallel transformation was underway. The Joseph Fox Bookshop at 1724 Sansom St. (Figure 1.8), opened in 195, anticipated this shift with its thoughtfully curated selection of titles on architecture, literary fiction and nonfiction, and art. While not overtly radical, it laid the groundwork for a more curated, idea-driven bookselling model.⁷⁶ In 1973, Giovanni’s Room—one of the first gay bookstores in the United States—opened at *345 S 12th St.* Founded by Tom Wilson Weinberg, Dan Sherbo, and Bern Boyle, it played a critical role during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s by offering books and resources on HIV/AIDS that were unavailable elsewhere.⁷⁷ Its intimate atmosphere offered a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQ+ individuals to gather, connect, and find community at a time when such spaces were few and far between (Figure 1.9). Two years later, in 1975, activist Sheila Lee Goldmacher co-founded Alexandria Books, the city’s first lesbian and feminist bookstore, further expanding the literary landscape for marginalized voices.⁷⁸ In 1976, Wooden Shoe Books

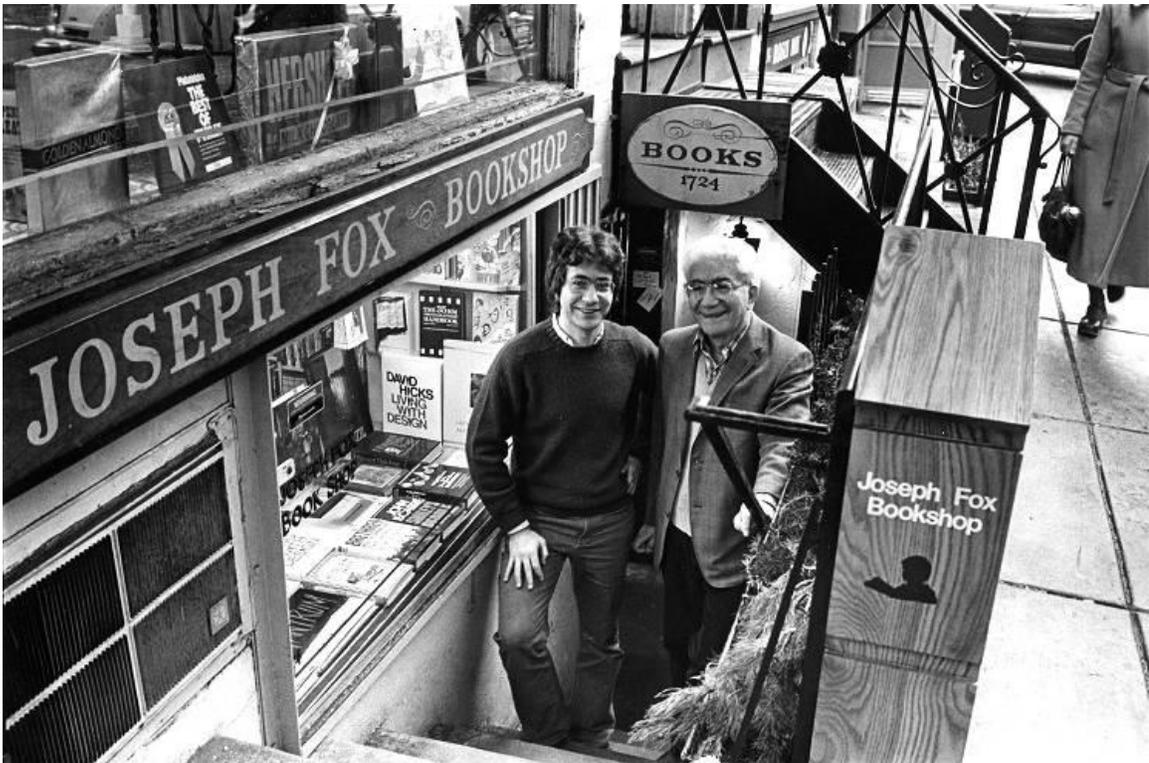
⁷⁵ Jennifer Cullen, “House of Our Own: Why This Eclectic Bookshop Deserves a Visit,” *34th Street Magazine*, 2018, accessed April 2025, <https://www.34st.com/article/2018/09/house-of-our-own-book-store-campus-penn-philadelphia>.

⁷⁶ Jordan Levy, “Joseph Fox Bookshop in Center City Closing after 70 Years, as Neighborhood Bookstores Press On,” *Billy Penn at WHYY*, January 19, 2022, <http://billypenn.com/2022/01/19/joseph-fox-bookshop-closing-philadelphia-retail-center-city/>.

⁷⁷ Jason Villemez, “Giovanni’s Room: The Booksellers Who Built a Community,” *Pennsylvania Capital-Star* (blog), June 12, 2023, accessed March 2025, <https://penncapital-star.com/civil-rights-social-justice/gioannis-room-the-booksellers-who-built-a-community/>.

⁷⁸ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

opened at 112 S. 20th St. as an anarchist collective and activist bookstore, reinforcing the growing network of ideologically driven bookshops in the city.⁷⁹



*Figure 1.8: Joseph Fox Bookshop at 1724 Sansom St., circa 1980.
Source: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center.*

⁷⁹ “Wooden Shoe Books & Records,” accessed April 2025, <https://www.woodenshoebooks.org/>.



*Figure 1.9: Second floor of Giovanni's Room at 345 S 12th St., 1983.
Source: Photo by Harry Eberlin via the Philadelphia Gay News.*

Among the emerging independent bookstores of the era, The Book Trader, a used bookstore, opened at 501 South Street—at a time when the neighborhood was attracting a growing countercultural scene, spurred in part by low real estate values left in the wake of the abandoned Crosstown Expressway proposal from the 1950s.⁸⁰ The store quickly became a destination for secondhand and out-of-print books, offering a quieter, more eclectic browsing experience that complemented the city's more overtly political literary spaces. Although The Book Trader would later relocate, it remains a popular fixture in Philadelphia's bookstore landscape today. Its evolution and spatial dynamics will be examined further in the case study chapter (Case Study).

⁸⁰ Dylan Gottlieb, "South Street," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2015, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/south-street/>.

Together, these specialized and radical bookstores of the 1960s and 1970s reflected a remarkable convergence of political conviction, literary culture, and place-making. Whether advancing Black consciousness, feminist thought, queer visibility, or anarchist ideals, these spaces helped shape Philadelphia's intellectual and activist landscape. They offered more than books—they offered belonging.

Yet while this era marked a high point in the city's independent and ideologically driven bookselling scene, the decades that followed would bring new challenges. Rising rents, changing retail trends, and the rise of chain bookstores began to unsettle the very conditions that had allowed these shops to thrive. As the city entered the 1980s, Philadelphia's bookstore ecosystem faced a profound reckoning—one defined as much by closures and consolidations as by survival. The next chapter traces this period of disruption and adaptation, charting how independent bookstores navigated an increasingly commercialized and competitive bookselling environment.

1.5 The 1980s–2000s: Chains, Closures, and Consolidation

Beginning in the 1980s, independent bookstores across the Philadelphia region faced mounting pressure from large national chains such as B. Dalton, Waldenbooks, Barnes & Noble (Figure 1.10), and Borders, which could offer deep discounts and aggressive marketing campaigns that smaller stores could not match. This shift significantly altered the local book economy. The number of independent bookstores in Philadelphia declined sharply by the 1980s. While the author was only able to identify 20 bookstore names from local newspaper records of that time, this figure contrasts starkly

with the 250 members recorded by the Booksellers' Association of Philadelphia in 1950—a group that included not only independent bookstores but also other members of the broader book trade. The Booksellers' Association of Philadelphia eventually disbanded during 1980s, a period of industry consolidation.⁸¹



*Figure 1.10: “Barnes & Noble’s new home at 1805 Walnut St. has a nice view of Rittenhouse Square, but plenty of competition nearby,” 1997.
Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer.*

The situation worsened in the 1990s with the rise of online bookselling, particularly Amazon.com, which offered even lower prices and unprecedented

⁸¹ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

convenience since 1995.⁸² These changes led to the closure of many independent bookstores, particularly in Center City, where rising rents and continued urban renewal made it increasingly difficult for small stores to survive.

Among the casualties were Meridian Bookstore at 340 South Street, the Philadelphia Drama Bookshop at 2209 Walnut Street—whose owner notably created a map of independent bookstores in Center City as a form of protest against the growing dominance of chain retailers—and the How to Do It Bookstore at 1608 Sansom Street, which closed in 1998.⁸³

Despite these challenges, six used bookstores opened between 1990 and the early 2000s, many located outside the immediate core of Center City. This spatial shift suggests that there remained surplus market space for secondhand bookselling. As the owner of House of Our Own, Sanford remarked, “For every new book sold in a chain bookstore, there is one more old book on the market.”⁸⁴ Consequently, used bookstores were somewhat insulated from the pressures faced by center city independent new bookstores during this transitional period.

⁸² Brad Stone, *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon* (Little, Brown and Company, 2013), chapter 3.

⁸³ Evidence of Meridian Bookstore, Philadelphia Drama Bookshop, and How to Do It Bookstore drawn from newspaper advertisements and articles published in *the Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News*, various dates between 1970 and 1990. The How to Do It Bookstore is known to have closed in 1998. While other bookstores’ exact closure dates are unknown, none appear in public directories or news listings after 1990.

⁸⁴Debbie Sanford (Owner of House of Our Own Bookstore), interviewed by author, February 2025.

1.6 Pandemic Fallout and Post-COVID Resurgence

The situation worsened dramatically with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Many independent bookstores that had previously weathered the storm of chain competition and online retail survived by building strong communities through in-store events, author readings, and other offline activities. But as lockdowns and social distancing reduced foot traffic and made public gatherings unsafe, these vital forms of engagement disappeared—leaving many stores unable to sustain themselves.



*Figure 1.11: The outside of Joseph Fox Bookshop along Sansom Street in Center City.2022.
Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer.*

One of the most notable losses was the Joseph Fox Bookshop at 1724 Sansom Street, which closed in 2022 after 70 years of operation (Figure 1.11). “Center City hasn’t

recovered—there’s nobody even working, it’s just dead,” the owner stated in a 2022 WHYY interview, highlighting the ongoing economic challenges downtown.⁸⁵

This closure was particularly poignant given the shop’s long record of resilience. Joseph Fox Bookshop had weathered earlier threats, including the rise of national chains like Barnes & Noble in the 1990s. At the time, the Fox family’s commitment to “individualized, knowledgeable, and personal service” was credited in a 2001 *Family Business* feature as a key factor in its ability to stay competitive. The store also embraced large-volume sales and built relationships with authors and organizations hosting book readings and signings, maintaining a loyal customer base through personal connections and literary events.⁸⁶

Yet the post-pandemic retail landscape proved especially unforgiving. According to a 2021 Center City District report, the vacancy rate for storefronts in the area was 17.4% in September, only slightly down from 18.1% at the start of the year, but still significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.⁸⁷ With foot traffic diminished, office occupancy low, and downtown storefronts increasingly empty, even longstanding institutions like Joseph Fox could no longer sustain operations.

Another important case is People’s Books & Culture, formerly known as the Penn Book Center (Figure 1.12), which illustrates not only the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but also the financial strain of transitioning toward a boutique, community-centered model. The store announced its closure on June 5, 2020, ending

⁸⁵ Levy, “Joseph Fox Bookshop in Center City Closing after 70 Years, as Neighborhood Bookstores Press On.”

⁸⁶ Levy.

⁸⁷ Levy.

nearly 60 years of operation in West Philadelphia. Before the pandemic hit, the new owners had made bold investments to reimagine the space—not just as a bookstore, but as a cultural hub. They significantly raised staff wages, hosted frequent readings and book launches, and supported local initiatives like the Philadelphia Emergency Writers Fund. However, the sudden disappearance of in-person events and foot traffic due to COVID-19 left the store unable to recoup these costs. The case underscores a painful paradox: while efforts to modernize and deepen community engagement aligned with broader trends in independent bookselling, they also increased vulnerability in a moment of profound disruption.



Figure 1.12: People's Books & Culture (formerly the Penn Book Center) at 130 S. 34th Street. Photograph by The Daily Pennsylvanian, 2020.

In addition to the loss of legacy bookstores, several younger shops that had emerged during the independent bookselling resurgence between 2009 and 2018 also

shuttered during the pandemic. The Spiral Bookcase, a new and used bookstore at 4257 Main Street, closed in 2021. In a heartfelt farewell posted on its website, the owner reflected:

I think I've done a good job of navigating the past three and a half years, but I have little idea of how to return to truly embodying the ethos of an indie bookshop—with offerings like in-store readings, release parties, lectures, and workshops. As a disabled person, it's extremely important to me that I keep everyone safe—and right now, I can't do much beyond offering a (relatively) safe place to shop.⁸⁸

While the shrinking income posed a serious challenge, it was not the only factor behind such closures. For many booksellers, the inability to function as a meaningful community space—to host events, build relationships, and engage in face-to-face conversation—proved even more devastating. In a further reflection, the owner expressed deeper frustration with the structural limitations of the industry itself:

I want to dream about what an independent bookstore can truly be without the confines of capitalism, consumerism, and gentrification. How can we share stories, build communities, and support authors while also divesting from the big publishing houses that bring in billions of dollars of revenue, but are somehow also unable to provide most writers with a livable income?⁸⁹

This sentiment captures a broader crisis of purpose among indie booksellers during the pandemic: not just how to stay open, but how to remain ethically aligned, socially connected, and culturally relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Similarly, Jules Goldman Books & Records (Figure 1.13), located at 29 N. 2nd Street, closed in 2024 after 15 years of operation, citing both the lingering challenges of

⁸⁸ “The End of an Era 3 – The Spiral Bookcase,” accessed April 2025, <https://spiralbookcase.com/blogs/blog/the-end-of-an-era-3>.

⁸⁹ “The End of an Era 3 – The Spiral Bookcase.”

the pandemic and the owner’s declining health.⁹⁰ For some legacy bookstores, the end of their story is not solely due to economic pressures, but also to the aging of long-time owners, who may no longer have the energy or resources to sustain the vibrant community engagement that independent bookstores often depend on. As these individuals step back, the challenge becomes not only financial survival, but generational transition—passing along both the space and its ethos to new stewards.



Figure 1.13: At Jules Goldman Books and Antiques in Old City, above, Lee West scans the titles. At left in the background is Jules Goldman himself. 2010. Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer.

The post-pandemic resurgence of independent bookstores has been marked by reinvention rather than return. While a new generation of shops has emerged—offering

⁹⁰ Stephanie Farr, “The 9,000-Square-Foot Estate Sale of an Old City Antiques Store Continues This Weekend,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 15, 2024.

curated selections, aesthetic interiors, and multifunctional spaces for community gathering, these models differ fundamentally from the older tradition of used bookstores.

Take The American Grammar, an independent bookstore that opened in Kensington in 2023. With around 500 carefully selected titles displayed on sleek, upcycled shelves and countertops, its inventory is far more limited than that of most used bookstores. The selection is unified by a thematic focus on American authors and issues of social and environmental justice, organized around a guiding question: “What constitutes America? What is an American? And what must one know to understand that?” According to its website, the space is as much about coffee and art as it is about books—designed with a gallery-like aesthetic and visual appeal suited for Instagram (Figure 1.14). As such, it represents a revitalizing gesture for the post-pandemic Kensington neighborhood.⁹¹

The joy of browsing chaotic stacks, the serendipity of discovery, and the low-margin, high-volume structure that sustained many secondhand shops have not found a foothold in the current landscape. Instead, the emphasis has shifted toward experience-driven retail and niche cultural branding.

⁹¹ “American Grammar - Coffee | Art | Books,” accessed April 2025, <https://www.american-grammar.com>.



Figure 1.14: Interior space of American Grammar, 2023.
Source: <https://www.american-grammar.com>.

Meanwhile, the older model of used bookstores—defined by chaotic stacks, the joy of serendipitous discovery, and a low-margin, high-volume business structure—has endured but has not experienced a comparable revival. Instead, the emphasis in today’s retail landscape has shifted toward experience-driven shopping and niche cultural branding, reflecting changing consumer values and urban dynamics.

1.7 Portraits of Resilience: Celebrating and Preserving Philadelphia’s Independent Bookstores

In 2023, Philadelphia witnessed a remarkable show of support for its independent literary scene through the creation and release of the Philadelphia Bookstore Map—a public art and community-driven project designed to celebrate and promote the city’s diverse bookshops (Map 1.2). The map was illustrated by artist Henry Crane, who spent a year painting storefront portraits of bookstores across the city. When first commissioned

by a group of local Philadelphia booksellers, Crane estimated there might be around 25 bookshops to include. However, the final count nearly double that. In total, he painted and cataloged 46 bookstores, capturing the unique character of each one.⁹²



Map 1.2: Philadelphia Bookstore Map, 2023. Illustrated by Henry Crane.
Source: Philly Bookstore Map, <https://phillybookstoremap.com/homepage/>.

Spearheaded by a coalition of local booksellers and supported through years of crowdfunding, the map featured Crane’s vibrant illustrations alongside descriptions, addresses, and contact information for each location. 50,000 copies were distributed to community spaces throughout the city (Figure 1.15). “I hope it brings people more

⁹² Prihar, “Locally Illustrated and Available for Free, the Philly Bookstore Map Showcases the City’s Thriving Scene.”

business,” said Molly Russakoff, owner of Molly’s Books and Records, who originally conceived the project. “Each shop is so unique in their vision and what they provide. You can see from the paintings how much care people take with their little spot... I want that to come across, and then people can make the rounds.” According to the map’s creators, over half of the featured stores sold new books, a quarter specialized in used books, and a handful focused on comics.⁹³



Figure 1.15: Copies of the Philadelphia Bookstore Map distributed to local institutions, 2023.
Source: Billy Penn at WHYY.

⁹³ Prihar, “Locally Illustrated and Available for Free, the Philly Bookstore Map Showcases the City’s Thriving Scene.”

The Philadelphia Bookstore Map stands as a powerful testament to the city’s independent literary landscape—a vibrant piece of public art and grassroots achievement that honors the diversity, creativity, and community spirit of its bookstores. Illustrated with care and distributed widely, the map not only brought visibility to often-overlooked cultural spaces but also fostered a sense of shared identity among booksellers and readers alike. Yet, its value lies not only in what it celebrates, but in what it reveals: the continued vulnerability of these institutions. The closures of The Spiral Bookcase and Jules Goldman Books & Records so soon after the map’s publication underscore how rapidly this ecosystem can change.⁹⁴

While the map represents a significant milestone in public recognition and community engagement, it is not enough on its own. Moving forward, there is an urgent need to identify and support the bookstores that carry historical, cultural, and social significance—especially those with legacy value or deep neighborhood roots. Academic researchers, policymakers, and cultural institutions must work together to develop frameworks for documenting, preserving, and sustaining these spaces. If the map is a portrait of resilience, then the next chapter must be one of intentional preservation—ensuring that the literary lifeblood of Philadelphia continues to thrive for generations to come.

⁹⁴ “The End of an Era 3 – The Spiral Bookcase”; Farr, “The 9,000-Square-Foot Estate Sale of an Old City Antiques Store Continues This Weekend.”

1.8 Conclusion

The evolution of independent bookstores in Philadelphia reflects broader trends in American bookselling—from early printshop counters to the rise of chain retailers and digital platforms. Used bookstores, once central to this landscape, played a particularly vital role during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Leary’s Bookstore, with its vast secondhand inventory, symbolized the golden age of Center City bookselling, catering to a wide audience through affordable access to literature.

Beginning in the 1960s, the countercultural movement gave rise to a diverse wave of independent bookstores, each catering to distinct political and cultural communities. From the 1980s through the 2000s, however, the rise of chain bookstores and the emergence of Amazon significantly disrupted this ecosystem. While both new and used independent bookstores were affected, used bookstores demonstrated unique resilience by serving niche markets with rare, out-of-print, and affordable titles. In the post-pandemic era, the revival of independent bookstores has primarily benefited new-book retailers—those offering curated selections, aesthetic interiors, and experience-driven spaces. In contrast, traditional used bookstores have not seen a comparable resurgence; they continue to operate more as enduring legacy institutions than as sites of new growth.

This section has outlined the overlapping yet diverging trajectories of general independent bookstores and used bookstores. While independent bookstores as a whole have adapted and, in some cases, thrived, used bookstores have shifted from mainstream hubs to culturally significant but more marginal players. Section 2 builds on this historical context by mapping the spatial and temporal changes of Philadelphia’s used

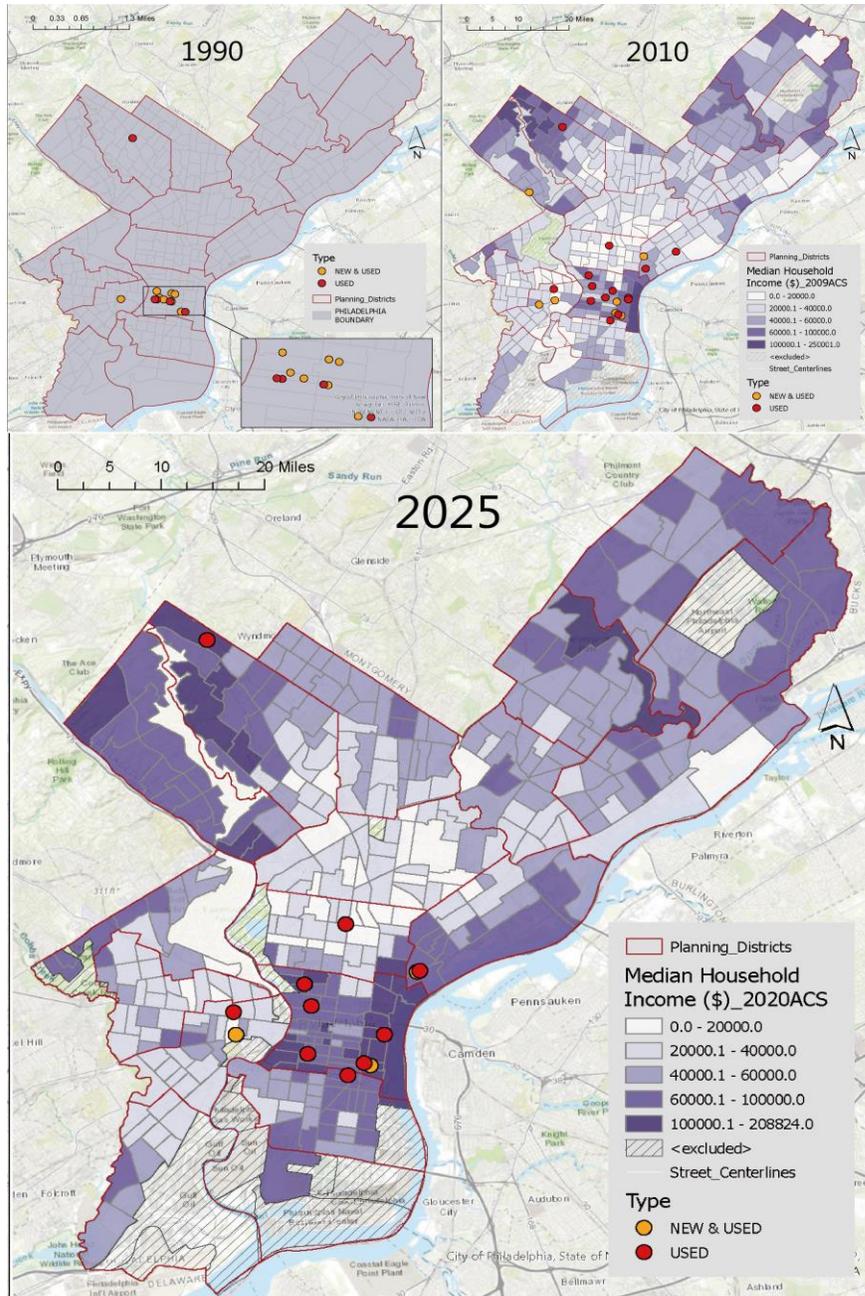
bookstores—analyzing how their geography, longevity, and location reflect broader urban, economic, and cultural transformations.

2 Mapping Used Bookstores Over Time

Philadelphia's used bookstore landscape has undergone notable spatial and temporal shifts between 1990, 2010, and 2025, as illustrated in Map 2.1. These three reference points were selected to capture critical moments in the sector's evolution discussed in Section 1, while also aligning with practical considerations for evaluating long-term change. Earlier periods, such as the mid-twentieth century, were not chosen because their geographic reference points are less directly comparable to Philadelphia's current urban structure. Moreover, a 35-year timespan enables analysis of endurance patterns consistent with common definitions of legacy businesses, which typically require at least 30 years of continuous operation.

In 1990, Philadelphia's used bookstore scene still exhibited a strong concentration in Center City (Map 2.1 top left). Although Center City's traditional bookselling clusters had already begun to weaken under the pressure of decades of urban renewal and the rise of national chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble and Borders, a notable aggregation of secondhand bookstores persisted downtown (Appendix A-1).

By 2010 (Map 2.1 top right), the landscape had shifted. Following the collapse of major bookstore chains during the Great Recession, a partial revival occurred: approximately twenty used bookstores were operating citywide, with new shops appearing in more affordable neighborhoods beyond Center City. This reflected broader trends toward localized, community-driven retail during the post-recession recovery (Appendix A-2).



Map 2.1: Spatial distribution of used bookstores and median household income across Philadelphia in 1990, 2010, and 2025. Created by the author.⁹⁵
 (A larger version of this map is available in Appendix B.)

⁹⁵ Bookstore data compiled by the author from on-site surveys, bookstore websites, City of Philadelphia property records, and interviews with bookstore owners. Median household income data are based on 5-year ACS estimates for 2006–2010 and 2016–2020. City district boundaries are outlined in red. The 1990 panel displays bookstore locations only, as comparable ACS income data were not available for that year.

However, this growth did not sustain. Between 2010 and 2025, rising rents, intensified redevelopment pressures, and the growing dominance of digital commerce contributed to a renewed contraction. By 2025, only thirteen used bookstores remained across Philadelphia (Table 2.1, Map 2.1 bottom), with survival patterns increasingly tied to higher-income districts and resilient cultural corridors.

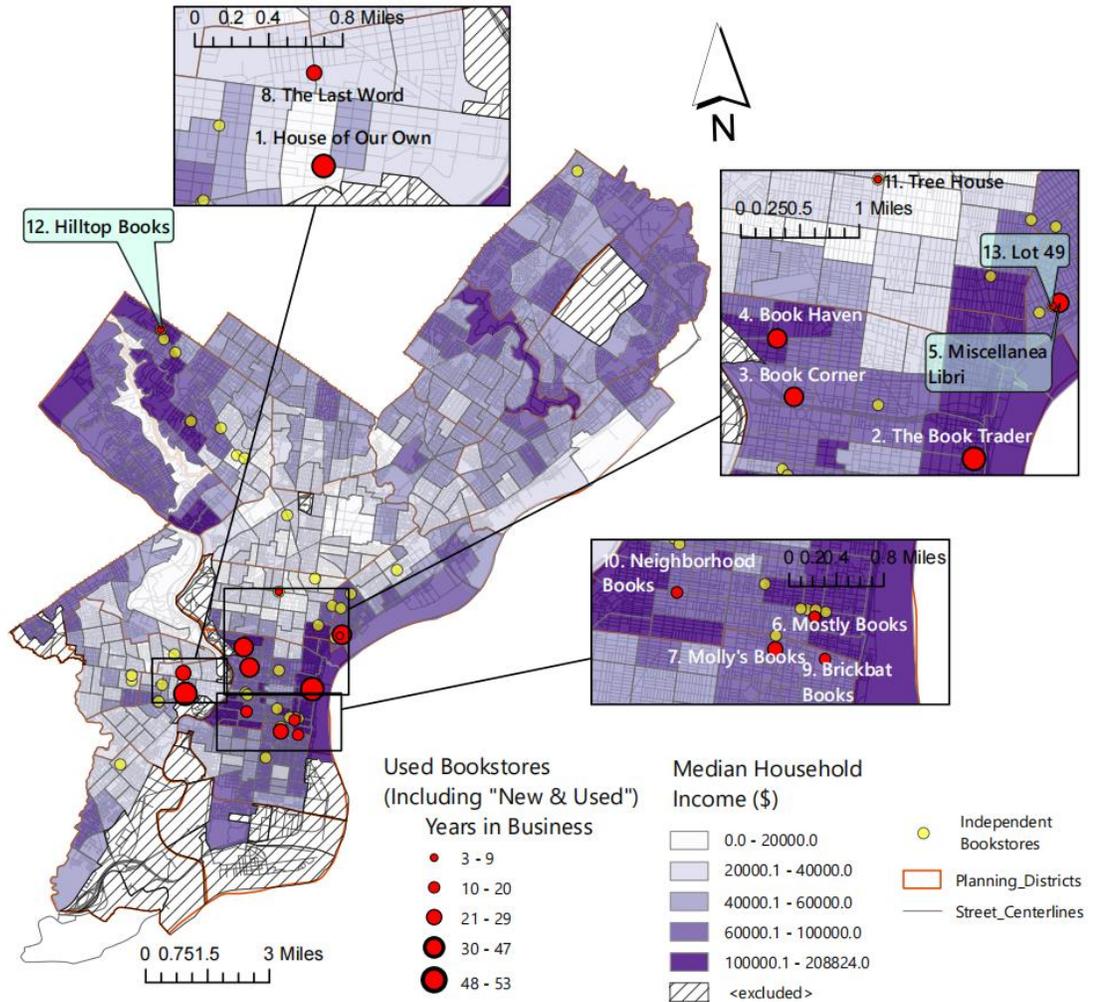
#	Bookstore Name	Address	Neighborhood	Zip	Bldg. Constructed	Type	Years in Business	Start Year	NGO
1	House of Our Own	3920 Spruce St	University City	19104	1890	NEW & USED	53	1971	
2	The Book Trader	7 N 2nd St	Old City	19106	1890	USED	48	1976	
3	Book Corner	311 N 20th St	Logan Square	19103	1922	USED	33	1991	✓
4	Bookhaven	2202 Fairmount Ave	Fairmount	19130	1920	USED	30	1994	
5	Miscellanea Libri	454 E Girard Ave	North Philadelphia	19125	1915	USED	30	1994	
6	Mostly Books	529 Bainbridge St	Queen Village	19147	1915	USED	28	1997	
7	Molly's Books	1010 S 9th St	Italian Market	19147	1920	USED	25	1999	
8	The Last Word	220 S 40th St	University City	19104	1960	USED	22	2002	
9	Brickbat Books	709 S 4th St	Queen Village	19147	1915	NEW & USED	15	2009	
10	Neighborhood Books	1906 South St	Southwest Center City	19146	1915	USED	11	2013	
11	Tree House Books	1430 W Susquehanna Ave	North Philadelphia	19121	1915	USED	9	2005	✓
12	Hilltop Books	84 Bethlehem Pike	Chestnut Hill	19118	1925	USED	3	2021	✓
13	Lot 49 Books	408 E Girard Ave	North Philadelphia	19125	1920	NEW & USED	3	2021	

Note: "Bldg. Constructed" refers to the year in which the current building was constructed. "Start Year" indicates when the bookselling business was established. "NGO" denotes whether the business is operated as a nonprofit organization.

Table 2.1: Existing Used Bookstores in Philadelphia, 2025. Compiled by the author.

Spatial patterns illustrated in Map 2.2 reveal a consolidation of surviving used bookstores into specific zones of the city. By 2025, the majority of long-standing stores are concentrated in and around Center City, Philadelphia’s historic downtown. This clustering overlaps with neighborhoods characterized by relatively high median household incomes and a dense presence of cultural and educational institutions—including universities, libraries, and museums. These factors likely contribute to the sustained viability of these bookstores, as such areas offer both a stable customer base and a supportive cultural infrastructure. Of the five legacy bookstores that have operated

for over 30 years, four are located in or adjacent to Center City, underscoring how the city's economic and institutional core has become a refuge for used bookstores in an increasingly challenging retail environment.



Map 2.2: Used bookstores and Median Household Income in Philadelphia, 2025. Created by the author.

A notable example is The Book Trader, situated in the affluent Old City neighborhood. Its continued operation as a low-margin, secondhand business in a high-rent, tourist-driven area highlights the particular niche it has cultivated—appealing to

customers who value a curated inventory, the tactile experience of browsing, and the store's historic ambiance.

One significant outlier to this central clustering is House of Our Own in University City (Map 2.2). This bookstore lies outside the downtown area in a West Philadelphia neighborhood that, on paper, has lower median household income. Yet the context of University City is unique: much of the surrounding area is dominated by the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, populated by students, faculty, and visiting scholars whose presence does not register in conventional income statistics. House of Our Own's longevity thus reflects a different model of resilience—one rooted not in a wealthy local clientele, but in an academic community and an ideological mission.

Meanwhile, the post-2010 period has seen a marked decline in the emergence of new used bookstores (Map 2.1). The maps and survey data show that younger secondhand bookstores (those operating less than 10 years) are now geographically dispersed. This indicates increasingly high barriers to entry in the current retail environment. Indeed, several stores present in 2010 closed in the ensuing years, and very few comparable replacements opened. The climax of roughly twenty used bookstores around 2010 gave way to a steady erosion, leaving the 13 remaining stores by 2025 largely as holdovers from earlier decades rather than new ventures. The continued survival of this small group, despite such adverse conditions, is telling. It testifies to these stores' adaptability, deep community roots, and the niche value they provide in the age of digital media. In effect, Philadelphia's used book trade in 2025 rests on the shoulders of a

handful of legacy businesses that function more as enduring cultural institutions than as growth-oriented retail enterprises.

To explore this legacy in greater depth, the next section presents three case studies that represent distinct trajectories of endurance and transformation: House of Our Own, Robin's Bookstore, and the Book Trader. Each was chosen not only for its longevity, but also for its unique relationship to place, income context, and survival strategy. (1) House of Our Own (est. 1971) is Philadelphia's oldest surviving radical used bookstore, located in University City. Its location within a university neighborhood with low reported median income belies the intellectual wealth of its academic clientele. Housed in a locally designated historic rowhouse, the store's survival stems from a combination of physical heritage, ideological mission, and embeddedness in Penn's academic culture. (2) Robin's Bookstore (est. 1936, closed 2012) was once one of the city's most politically engaged bookstores, known for its progressive inventory and activist events. Though it closed as a commercial store, it gave rise to the Moonstone Arts Center, a cultural nonprofit that continues its mission through programming and public engagement. Robin's Bookstore represents a transformation model—where legacy bookstores evolve into nonprofit cultural institutions. (3) The Book Trader (est. 1976), located in the high-rent Old City historic district, represents a commercial model of resilience. Despite operating a low-margin secondhand business, it has survived in a competitive area by catering to tourists and local collectors, offering a curated browsing experience in a historic setting. Its endurance speaks to the viability of well-positioned legacy bookstores in affluent, culturally active neighborhoods.

Together, these three case studies illustrate a spectrum of resilience strategies—mission-driven, nonprofit transformation, and tourist-oriented retail—and reflect the broader dynamics of Philadelphia’s shifting urban and cultural geography. The maps that follow contextualize these examples within the evolving spatial patterns of used bookstores citywide, setting the stage for deeper exploration in the sections to come.

3 Case Study

3.1 Case Study 01: House of Our Own Bookstore

3.1.1 Introduction

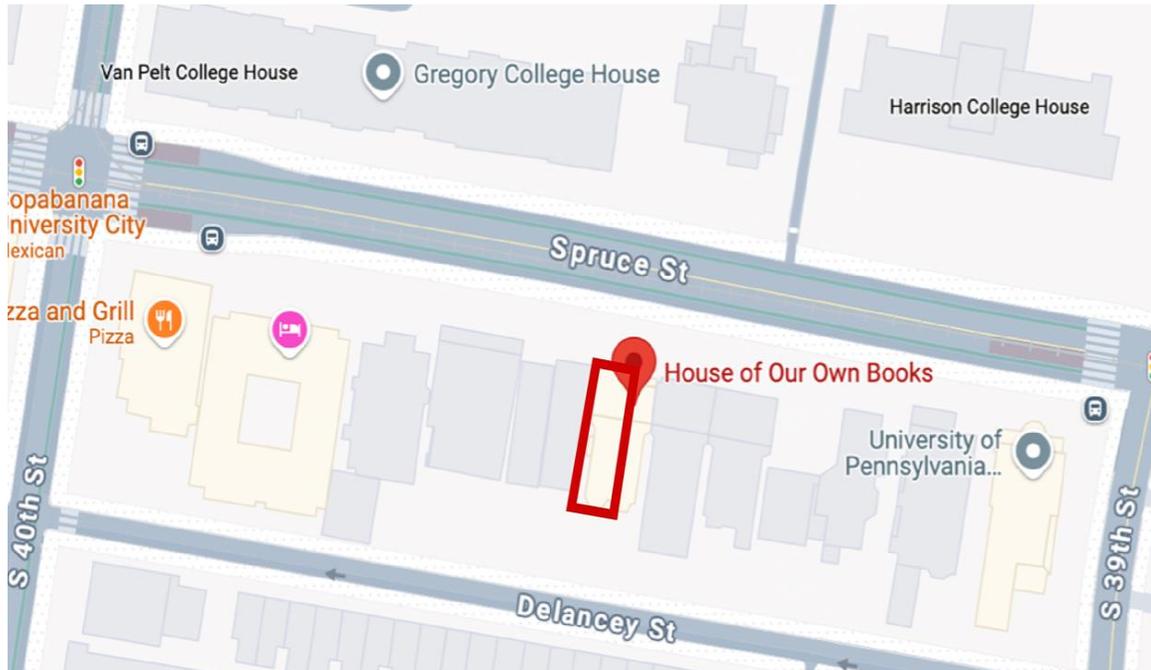


Figure 3.1: House of Our Own Bookstore at 3920 Spruce Street. 2025.
Source: Google Maps.

Located at 3920 Spruce Street in Philadelphia (Figure 3.1), House of Our Own Bookstore is one of the city’s most iconic radical used bookstores, with a legacy spanning over half a century. Founded in 1971 by University of Pennsylvania alumnus Phil Scranton and thirteen other collective members—including current owner Debbie Sanford—the store originally operated as a nonprofit staffed by volunteers committed to promoting democratic socialism. Its nonprofit status ended in 1983, and the following

year, Sanford and her husband, Greg Schirm, assumed sole ownership, continuing to guide the store while honoring its founding ideals.⁹⁶



Figure 3.2: House of Our Own Bookstore at 3920 Spruce Street situated among row houses, 2025. Source: Google Earth.

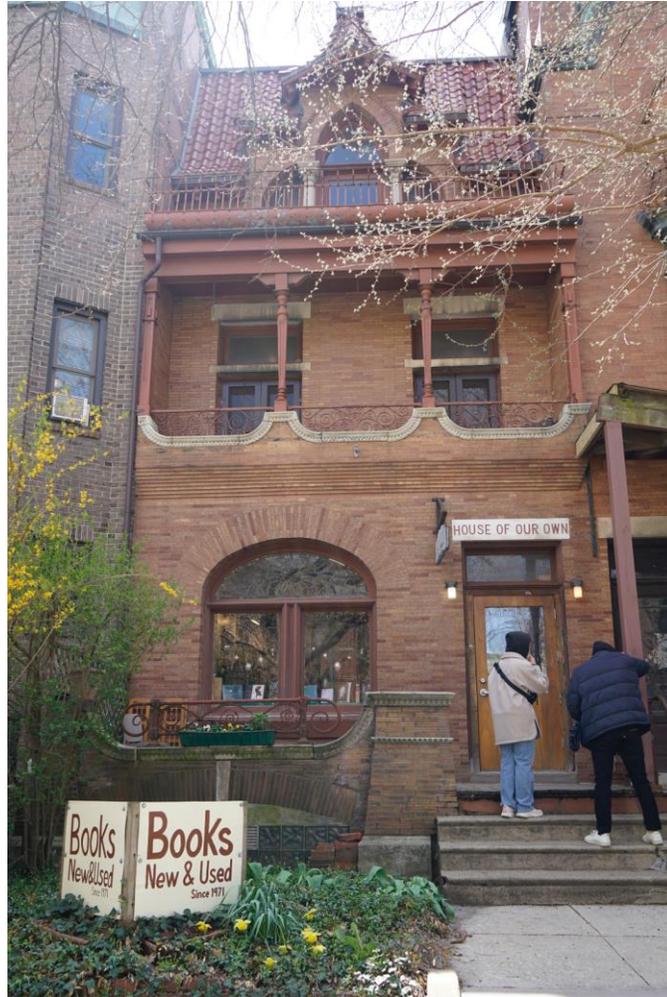
Born amidst the politically charged atmosphere of the Vietnam War era, the bookstore provided local students and residents with literature to contextualize contemporary social and political upheavals, quickly becoming a vibrant center for activism, intellectual discourse, and cultural exploration.⁹⁷ From the late 20th century into the early 2000s, only two used bookstores in Philadelphia—House of Our Own and Robin’s Bookstore (closed in 2013)—actively championed socialist ideals and served as spaces for civil rights advocacy and community gathering.⁹⁸ Today, House of Our Own

⁹⁶ Dick Pothier, “Political Works and Books for the Price of Browsing,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 22, 1982.

⁹⁷ Cullen, “House of Our Own: Why This Eclectic Bookshop Deserves a Visit.”

⁹⁸ Based on the author’s survey of *the Philadelphia Inquirer’s* literary calendars from 1984 to 2003, which listed upcoming literary events such as lectures and workshops by writers and scholars. During this

remains the city's last radical legacy used bookstore committed to engaging both local and global cultural and political issues.



*Figure 3.3: Front elevation of House of Our Own, 2025.
Photograph by the author.*

Housed within a distinctive Victorian-era rowhouse designed by renowned Philadelphia architect Willis Gaylord Hale, House of Our Own Bookstore embodies both architectural and cultural significance. Constructed in 1890 as part of a series of six

period, only House of Our Own and Robin's Bookstore consistently appeared as event venues among the listings—standing out as used bookstores in contrast to the predominantly featured libraries and new bookstores.

buildings developed by William Weightman, only 3920 and its neighbor, 3922 Spruce Street, have retained their original 19th-century character (Figure 3.2). Hale’s eclectic architectural style, blending elements of Spanish and Middle Eastern influences, remains visible in the building’s Roman brick facade, terra-cotta detailing, and ornate arched windows. The second-floor loggia, supported by slender wooden columns with an iron railing, adds to the building’s distinct charm, while the multi-roofed dormer and triple-arched window on the upper-level showcase Hale’s signature whimsical design (Figure 3.3). Inside, the space retains much of its original woodwork, mosaic flooring, and built-in cabinetry, creating an inviting and labyrinthine atmosphere that encourages endless literary exploration (Figure 3.4).⁹⁹



Figure 3.4: Original cabinetry and wooden arch on the 2nd floor of House of Our Own, 2025. Photography by the author.

⁹⁹ Corey Loftus, *Nomination of 3920 Spruce Street to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places* (Philadelphia Historic Commission, 2019).

Unlike the uniformity of corporate bookstores, House of Our Own offers a deeply personal and intimate browsing experience. Its towering shelves brim with radical, socialist, feminist, and international literature, providing a space where readers engage with both historical and contemporary political thought. Beyond its role as a bookstore, it has long served as a cultural hub and activist space, hosting events, discussions, and literary gatherings that address pressing local and global political issues since 1980s. For over five decades, the bookstore has remained a steadfast presence in Philadelphia's intellectual landscape, both as a physical embodiment of the city's architectural heritage and as a sanctuary for readers and activists alike.

Throughout its history, House of Our Own has weathered significant economic and competitive pressures, particularly the rise of corporate bookstores and university-led gentrification in West Philadelphia during the late 20th century. Yet, thanks to the commitment of its owners and the continued support of Penn students and faculty, the bookstore has endured as a vital space for intellectual and political discourse. More than a place to buy books, it remains a community anchor—one that champions independent thought, fosters activism, and preserves an essential part of Philadelphia's cultural and literary heritage.

3.1.2 Spatial Rhythms and Historic Resonance: The Interior Palimpsest of House of Our Own

Visiting House of Our Own feels less like entering a store and more like stepping into a friend's home—or returning to one's own. Nestled within a row of ordinary Victorian houses, the bookstore quietly blends into its residential surroundings. Its

understated elegance is evident in the thoughtful exterior details: a simple sign and nameplate, and a classic bronze bookstore plaque tucked beneath the porch, all harmonizing with the orange-red brick façade (Figure 3.5 left). Yet, as you push open the ever-slightly-ajar door—a gesture that both obscures the interior and hints at the introspective nature of the space—you’re met with a surprisingly narrow corridor (Figure 3.5 right). One must tread carefully, ensuring backpacks don’t brush against the tightly packed shelves lining the entryway.



Figure 3.5: Entrance Porch and entrance corridor of House of Our Own, 2025. Photograph by the author.

According to store co-owner Debbie Stanford, “I have a sense of spatial organization—I know how to arrange so many items to create a welcoming space. I’m

good at setting the pace. After all, I used to be a pianist (Figure 3.6).”¹⁰⁰ Her background in music subtly informs the store’s layout, where the rhythm of browsing is carefully composed through intentional spatial cues. For example, although the entrance corridor on the ground floor is quite narrow, a left turn leads to a more open area where books are spaced more generously and organized around current, popular political topics—offering a sense of visual and thematic relief (Figure 3.7). The staircase, lined with books on both sides, can be a tight squeeze, but the slow ascent encourages visitors to pause and take in the surroundings (Figure 3.8 left). At the top of the stairs, a left turn reveals a small alcove filled with visually rich books, particularly on art and design (Figure 3.8 right). The intimacy of this corner allows visitors to linger and flip through pages in peace, undisturbed by foot traffic. Further into the second floor, after navigating the winding shelves, one encounters a cozy reading nook—anchored by a signature red armchair—inviting readers to sit down, reflect, and lose themselves in a book (Figure 3.9).

¹⁰⁰Debbie Sanford (Owner of House of Our Own Bookstore), interviewed by author, October 2024.



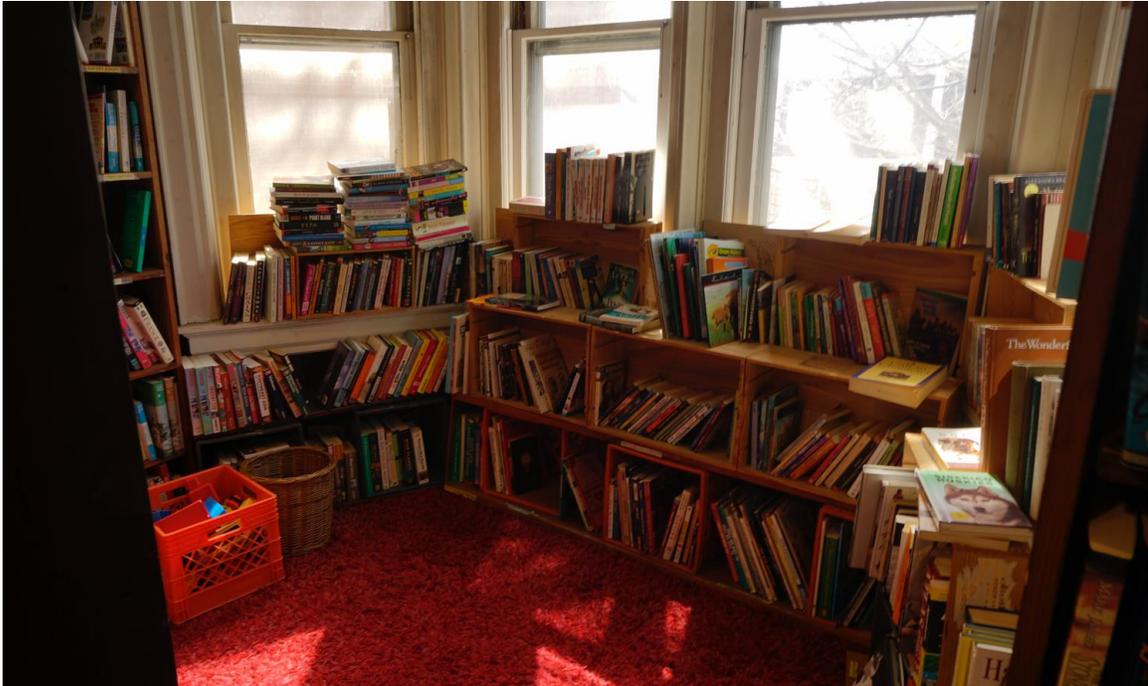
*Figure 3.6: Debbie talking about her curation philosophy, 2024.
Photograph by the author.*



*Figure 3.7: Open area on the ground floor of House of Our Own, 2025.
Photograph by the author*



*Figure 3.8: Staircase and a small alcove filled with visually rich books on the second floor, 2025.
Photograph by the author.*



*Figure 3.9: A cozy reading nook on the second floor, 2025.
Photograph by the author.*

In addition to its distinctive spatial layout, House of Our Own is notable for the depth and breadth of its curated book selection—particularly its emphasis on international politics, revolutionary movements, and post-colonial studies. The store carries a remarkable number of titles on subjects that are increasingly rare in other Philadelphia bookstores, especially those concerning the Global South and Third World liberation struggles. One shelf, for example, is densely packed with volumes on the Russian Revolution, Leninism, and Stalinism—most of which published between 1960s-2000s (Figure 3.10 left). Another expansive section is devoted to the Middle East and North Africa, organized not just by country—such as Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Palestine—but also by themes like Arab politics, gender in the Middle East, resistance movements, and diaspora (Figure 3.10 right). Books published during specific historical periods are often no longer reprinted or stocked by mainstream independent bookstores, underscoring

the unique role of second-hand bookstores in preserving and reflecting the evolving reading habits of urban communities.



Figure 3.10: Volumes on the Russian Revolution, Leninism, and Stalinism, and Volumes on the Middle East and North Africa, 2025.
Photograph by the author.

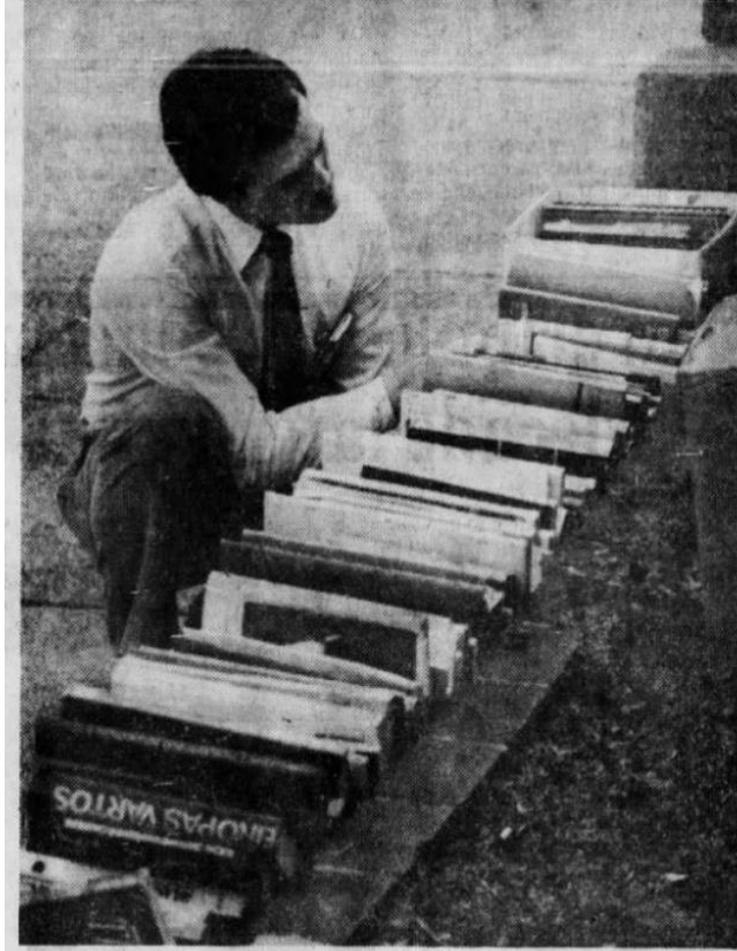
In this way, the interior curation of House of Our Own is not only a reflection of its owners’ intellectual commitments, but also a meaningful extension of the building’s historic identity. Housed in a late 19th-century Victorian twin home, the store’s book-lined staircases, narrow corridors, and overflowing alcoves do more than respond to spatial constraints—they activate the architecture with new layers of cultural and political meaning. The building, which is listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, becomes a palimpsest: its preserved domestic structure bearing the imprint of decades of radical thought, global solidarity, and literary exchange.

The sheer volume of stock—spanning two floors and encompassing everything from revolutionary theory to regional histories—further sets the store apart. It is this density of material that enables visitors to trace long arcs of intellectual and political history through the physical space itself. Rather than freezing the past in time, House of Our Own demonstrates how a historic site can remain alive, evolving with each carefully placed bookshelf, each annotated volume, and each visitor who steps inside and becomes part of its unfolding story.

3.1.3 A Socialist Sanctuary and Radical Archive: The Intellectual Life of House of Our Own

From its founding, House of Our Own Bookstore distinguished itself as far more than a retail space—it was a sanctuary for radical politics, community engagement, and global literacy. When House of Our Own first opened, its focus centered on political and historical literature, aiming to equip University of Pennsylvania students—and the wider community—with the tools to understand contemporary global issues, particularly the Cold War. A photograph from 1982 captures this ethos in a quietly radical gesture: a ten-foot-long row of books placed on the front lawn, accompanied by a handwritten sign inviting passersby to take a book freely (Figure 3.11).¹⁰¹ This act of mutual aid exemplified the store’s founding commitment to the democratization of knowledge and its roots as a cooperative.

¹⁰¹ Pothier, “Political Works and Books for the Price of Browsing.”



*Figure 3.11: Dentistry Student Bob Shea looks over free offerings on lawn, 1982.
Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Over time, the collection broadened, incorporating fiction, art, and academic texts, yet the store's political commitments never wavered. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it grew into one of the most significant independent outlets for leftist, post-colonial, and activist literature on the East Coast.¹⁰²

Beyond its shelves, House of Our Own played a vital role in Philadelphia's activist ecosystem. The store became a distribution hub for radical publications such as

¹⁰² Michael McGettigan, "It's Not Products; It's Ideas. Writing and Books Are the Foundation of Freedom.," *Philadelphia Daily News*, October 13, 1989.

Socialist Appeal, People's Weekly World, Greater Philadelphia Democratic Left, Strike!, and *War Times*. Its front counter regularly featured anti-war stickers, bookmarks for AIDS advocacy organizations like Philadelphia FIGHT, and contact cards from the Pennsylvania Lesbian and Gay Task Force, which provided a hotline for reporting discrimination and violence (Figure 3.12). Flyer's advertising political demonstrations, public lectures, and grassroots organizing efforts were a constant presence, reinforcing the store's position as a platform for dissent and civic action.¹⁰³



Figure 3.12: A basket at the counter containing activist badges and stickers, 2004.
Source: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

In 1984, the political role of the space deepened when the Philadelphia Marxist School opened on the second floor of House of Our Own at 3920 Spruce Street. While the bookstore's founders were not directly involved in the operation of the school, co-

¹⁰³ Linda K. Harris, "Activism in Many Causes Adds Distinct Feel to the Area," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 22, 2004.

founder Bob Schirm acknowledged the cultural tensions surrounding the term “Marxist” in the American context.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the presence of the school further reinforced the bookstore’s identity as a center for radical education and progressive discourse.

Throughout the 1980s and early 2000s, House of Our Own maintained an active program of literary and political events, regularly featuring authors, performers, and scholars whose work addressed civil rights, global inequality, and post-colonial resistance.¹⁰⁵ Among the most notable participants were Constance Winifred Curry and Mae Bertha Carter, both of whom were prominent figures in the American civil rights movement.¹⁰⁶ In 1985, the store hosted a lecture by William Hinton on leftist perspectives on communist China, sponsored by the Marxist School.¹⁰⁷ That same year, a performance featuring American, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean political songs brought a musical dimension to the store’s activist programming.¹⁰⁸ In 2000, the author of *The Lost Heart of Asia* and *In Siberia* presented a book talk, further anchoring the store’s reputation for global engagement.¹⁰⁹

By the early 2000s, the rise of corporate bookstore chains such as Borders and Barnes & Noble posed a significant threat to independent booksellers. While Friday night readings and author events became less frequent citywide, the store remained one of the few spaces that continued to host regular literary gatherings. Within Philadelphia, only a

¹⁰⁴ “For Classes on Classes, A Marxist School,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 1984.

¹⁰⁵ Data source: Book talks and workshops documented in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* literary calendar, 1984–2005.

¹⁰⁶ “Literary Calendar,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 03, 1989.

¹⁰⁷ “An Insider’s Guide to What’s Hot in Town,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, March 29, 1985.

¹⁰⁸ “Literary Calendar,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November, 1985.

¹⁰⁹ “For The Family,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 11, 2000.

handful of bookstores—such as Robin’s Bookstore, Giovanni’s Room, and Joseph Fox Bookshop—shared a similar commitment to critical discourse.¹¹⁰ Yet among them, House of Our Own stood out for its sustained emphasis on globally conscious literature.

3.1.4 A Loyal Community Sustained Through the Fight Against Gentrification

House of Our Own stood witness to the shifting landscape of bookselling in Philadelphia, particularly as corporate chains expanded their dominance in the late 1990s. By 1998, the University of Pennsylvania became a battleground in the struggle to protect small, independent bookstores from being crushed by major retail chains. The tension escalated when Penn’s book committee began posting textbook lists online, effectively providing corporate booksellers with a blueprint for competing with independent stores. The situation grew even more dire following the closure of Penn’s 60-year-old University Bookstore, which was handed over to Barnes & Noble. The old bookstore building was demolished to make way for a massive new Penn-affiliated Barnes & Noble bookstore, located between Walnut and Sansom Streets—the very structure that now serves as the university’s retail and gift shop.¹¹¹

At the time, the Penn administration framed the transition as an effort to revitalize the campus neighborhood, likening it to Harvard Square in Cambridge, where independent booksellers coexisted alongside large retailers. Steven D. Murray, Penn’s vice president for business services, insisted that the move was not intended to harm

¹¹⁰ Data source: Book talks and workshops documented in *the Philadelphia Inquirer* literary calendar, 2000–2010.

¹¹¹ “On Penn Campus, a Textbook Case of Market Forces at Work,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 19, 1998.

small businesses, but rather to create a vibrant commercial district. However, many faculty members saw it as a threat to independent bookstores like House of Our Own and joined efforts to resist the shift (Figure 3.13).¹¹²



*Figure 3.13: Penn Students and Faculty Gathered in front of the bookstore, 1998.
Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer*

In response, Penn professors launched petition drives to support small booksellers. Among them, Thomas J. Sugrue, associate professor of history, took direct action by exclusively providing his textbook lists to House of Our Own, encouraging his students to purchase their books from “bookstore owners who care about books and ideas” rather than corporate retailers. Co-owner Deborah Sanford warned of the broader consequences of corporate consolidation in bookselling, stating: “If the big chains kill off small booksellers, decisions on what books to stock will lack intellectual coherence; they

¹¹²“On Penn Campus.”

will be based on what sells fast and turns the biggest profit.” Echoing this sentiment, Larry Gross, a communication professor, argued that Penn “needs to go out of its way to foster conditions that favor small shops like House of Our Own, which are part of what makes the campus an interesting place.”¹¹³

According to an interview with Debbie Sanford, at one point during the replacement of Penn’s bookstore, an architect hired by the university proposed relocating House of Our Own and redesigning its interior. However, upon visiting the store, he ultimately abandoned the idea, remarking: “This is exactly Cambridge—I have nothing to do with it.”¹¹⁴

Despite faculty support, the rise of big-box bookstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble had a significant impact on House of Our Own. Business dropped sharply when Borders opened a store next to the already existing Barnes & Noble on Rittenhouse Square. Yet, House of Our Own persisted, thanks in large part to loyal professors who continued ordering textbooks through the store, ensuring it remained an intellectual stronghold amid the commercialization of bookselling.¹¹⁵

3.1.5 Across Time and Language: Lin Huiyin, Chinese Students, and the bookstore as Cultural Bridge

For decades, Debbie Sanford’s daily routine has included sharing the bookstore’s unlikely connection to one of China’s most celebrated architects and cultural icons, Lin

¹¹³ “On Penn Campus.”

¹¹⁴ Author interview with Debbie Stanford, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Author interview with Debbie Stanford, 2025.

Huiyin. Almost every Chinese visitor who steps into House of Our Own is met with the story of how Lin, the first female architect in modern China, once lived in this very building during her time at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s.¹¹⁶

In 1924, Lin arrived in Philadelphia with her fiancé, Liang Sicheng, to study architecture in the Beaux-Arts style school under the renowned French architect Paul Cret in UPenn. However, due to gender restrictions at the time, Lin was barred from officially enrolling in the architecture program. The university deemed it inappropriate for women to participate, arguing that architectural students often had to work late hours, and the presence of unchaperoned women would be improper. Undeterred, Lin found a way to pursue her passion, enrolling as a Fine Arts student while also working her way into architectural studies. By spring 1926, she had become a part-time assistant to the Architectural Design staff, proving her determination and defying societal expectations.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Sanford, interview.

¹¹⁷ Loftus, "Nomination of 3920 Spruce Street to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places."



*Figure 3.14: Information about Lin Huiyin displayed on the entrance clipboard at House of Our Own, 2025.
Photograph by the author.*

During her time at Penn, Lin rented a room at 3920 Spruce Street for two semesters in 1924, making this building a significant piece of her legacy.¹¹⁸ Debbie, recognizing the historical importance of this connection, keeps citations of Lin's occupancy in a binder at the front desk, ready to share with the many Chinese tourists who make the pilgrimage to visit her former residence. Her records also document Lin's later move to 3707 Woodland Avenue (now demolished) for the 1925-26 academic year.

¹¹⁸ Loftus.

Meanwhile, Liang Sicheng, who would go on to become the father of modern Chinese architecture, rented rooms at several locations in West Philadelphia, including 318 South 40th Street, 3942 Pine Street, and 228 South 38th Street (also demolished).¹¹⁹

The second floor of House of Our Own still retains much of the original wooden furniture from Lin's era, adding a tangible layer to its historical significance (Figure 3.4). Upon entering the store, visitors are greeted by a display of old photographs and historical references, showcasing the building's long and storied past (Figure 3.14). For Sanford, witnessing the emotional connection that visitors—especially those from China—have with Lin's legacy has been a deeply moving experience. In an interview, she recalled one particularly touching encounter: "I am always touched by the Chinese people who come here to visit Lin Huiyin's former residence. Once, an elderly woman walked in, completely unaware that this was where Lin Huiyin had lived. When she realized it, she started weeping."¹²⁰

The store boasts an impressive selection of books on Chinese literature and architecture, reinforcing its role as a cultural bridge. Acknowledging the growing Chinese student population at Penn, Debbie has been actively learning Chinese to better communicate with her customers. She often places a volume of Chinese-language writing at the counter—both as a study aid and as a gesture of welcome—while also trying to understand the values embedded in these unfamiliar texts. This personal dedication, combined with the bookstore's carefully curated collection, has made House of Our Own

¹¹⁹ Sanford, interview.

¹²⁰ Sanford, interview.

one of the most accessible and welcoming places for Penn students seeking used Chinese-language books.¹²¹

This strong connection to Chinese literature is also a natural extension of the bookstore's long-standing commitment to Third World literature. For decades, House of Our Own has supported works from and about developing nations, offering a platform for voices often overlooked by mainstream bookstores. Whether through books on postcolonial studies, global socialism, or international struggles for justice, the store has continuously nurtured a space for cross-cultural dialogue and learning. In turn, the steadily growing number of Chinese students at Penn has become an essential source of support for the bookstore's continued development. Their engagement not only strengthens the store's financial sustainability but also fosters a dynamic cultural exchange, further cementing House of Our Own's role as a hub for intellectual and global discourse. Even today, its mission of providing students with critical global perspectives remains as strong as ever.

3.1.6 Conclusion

The case of House of Our Own Bookstore illustrates the remarkable endurance of a radical legacy used bookstore that has preserved not only its stock of ideas, but also the layered meanings embedded in its space. Its survival over more than five decades can be attributed to a rare convergence of factors: long-term ownership, architectural significance, ideological coherence, and deep-rooted community ties—particularly with

¹²¹ Sanford, interview.

the University of Pennsylvania. More than a retail space, the bookstore functions as an intellectual common, where architecture and curation are inseparable, and where every bookshelf and stairway contributes to a rhythm of discovery, reflection, and belonging.

By activating the domestic features of a registered historic rowhouse, House of Our Own becomes a palimpsest—an evolving site where each generation of readers, activists, and students inscribes new layers of meaning onto the physical structure. The interplay between its preserved Victorian form and the radical content within demonstrates how legacy used bookstores can animate historic architecture, making it newly relevant through cultural use.

Moreover, the store's emotional resonance among Chinese students and visitors, due to its historic connection with Lin Huiyin, reveals how transnational memory can amplify a bookstore's heritage value. This bond, strengthened through shared language, literature, and space, reflects the store's capacity to operate not only as a site of local activism, but also as a global node of cultural and historical significance.

House of Our Own thus exemplifies how legacy used bookstores serve as living heritage—spaces where intellectual traditions, community identities, and material preservation converge. Its continued presence challenges prevailing models of commercial sustainability and reminds us that cultural and spatial continuity can be powerful forms of resistance. As a case study, it underscores the need for preservation frameworks that extend beyond the material fabric to embrace the values, relationships, and meanings that legacy bookstores uniquely sustain.

3.2 Case study 02: Robin’s Bookstore (Closed in 2012)

3.2.1 Introduction

Robin’s Bookstore, founded in 1936 and located for most of its existence at 108 South 13th Street in Center City Philadelphia, was one of the city’s longest-running independent bookstores and a vital fixture in its mid-century literary and political landscape. Operated by two generations of the Robin family, the store became known for its rich selection of books on African American history, labor movements, civil rights, and radical politics, serving as a trusted destination for generations of socially engaged readers.¹²²

Although Robin’s carried used books—exclusively in its final years (approximately 2009–2012)—it was never primarily a used bookstore.¹²³ Its core identity rested on independent ownership and mission-driven curation. This case study therefore focuses not on Robin’s role in the used book trade, but on its trajectory as a legacy business navigating the pressures of urban redevelopment and shifting literary economies. As a comparative counterpart to House of Our Own, this section examines how both stores functioned as political and intellectual spaces, albeit through different models of continuity and preservation.

Whereas House of Our Own embeds its activist mission within the quieter rhythms of used book retail, Robin’s positioned cultural programming and political engagement as central and public-facing elements of its identity. After closing in 2012,

¹²² Ahsan, “Robin’s Reaches Final Chapter”

¹²³ Ahsan.

Robin's transitioned into the nonprofit Moonstone Arts Center, founded by Larry Robin in the 1980s. Though no longer a bookstore, Moonstone continues to carry forward aspects of Robin's legacy, particularly its dedication to poetry, public discourse, and social justice-focused programming.¹²⁴ This institutional shift illustrates how a bookstore's values—while detached from its retail and spatial origins—can persist and evolve in new forms.

Through the lens of Robin's, this section examines the legacy business dimension of this thesis's broader inquiry. It explores how cultural and intellectual value can outlive commercial operations, how nonprofit transformation may preserve selective aspects of bookstore heritage, and how symbolic survival can offer alternative paths for cultural continuity. In contrast with the materially continuous case of House of Our Own, Robin's highlights how different modes of value—commercial, spatial, and symbolic—diverge and adapt in response to changing urban and economic conditions.

3.2.2 The Rise of Robin's in a Pre-Renewal Center City as a literary hub (1936–1960s)

Founded in 1936 by David Robin and his sons Herman and Morris, Robin's Bookstore was originally a new and used bookstore located at 6 N. 13th St (along the Market St.) among the more than 20 bookstores operating in Center City Philadelphia at the time.¹²⁵ Established during the Great Depression, it survived economic hardship and became a pillar of the city's literary and activist communities. Despite multiple

¹²⁴ Ahsan. "Robin's Reaches Final Chapter"

¹²⁵ Ahsan.

relocations over the years, Robin's Bookstore remained within east Center City, serving as a witness to the city's evolving cultural and economic landscape. It reflected the impact of Philadelphia's urban renewal efforts, particularly the Market East Urban Renewal from 1950s, where chain stores and shopping malls displaced small businesses.¹²⁶

The bookstore relocated in 1960 to 13th and Market Street, establishing itself as a corner store and marking the beginning of a new chapter (Figure 3.15). That same year, as the nation underwent sweeping social and political change under President John F. Kennedy's leadership, Robin's Bookstore responded by expanding its collection from general categories to include more provocative and socially relevant literature. Topics such as anti-war movements, race relations, human sexuality, women's rights, and civil rights became central to the bookstore's identity. It was during this time that Larry Robin, David's grandson, joined the business, taking charge of the paperback department and helping to shape the store's growing reputation as a hub for radical thought and intellectual discourse.¹²⁷ At the time, Robin's Bookstore was part of a vibrant network of independent bookstores in Center City, including Leary's Bookstore (est. 1877) – 9 S. 9th St., Reedmor Bookstore (est. 1928) – 1220 Walnut St., Walnut Book Store (est. 1930) – 132 S. 9th St., Sessler's Bookstore (est. 1906) – 1314 Walnut St., Hasting's Bookstore

¹²⁶ Francesca Russello Ammon, "Urban Renewal," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2016, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/urban-renewal/>.

¹²⁷ Ahsan, "Robin's Reaches Final Chapter"

(est. 1959) – 1425 Walnut St. ¹²⁸ Each of these bookstores was within a ten-minute walk of one another, creating a dense literary hub in center city.

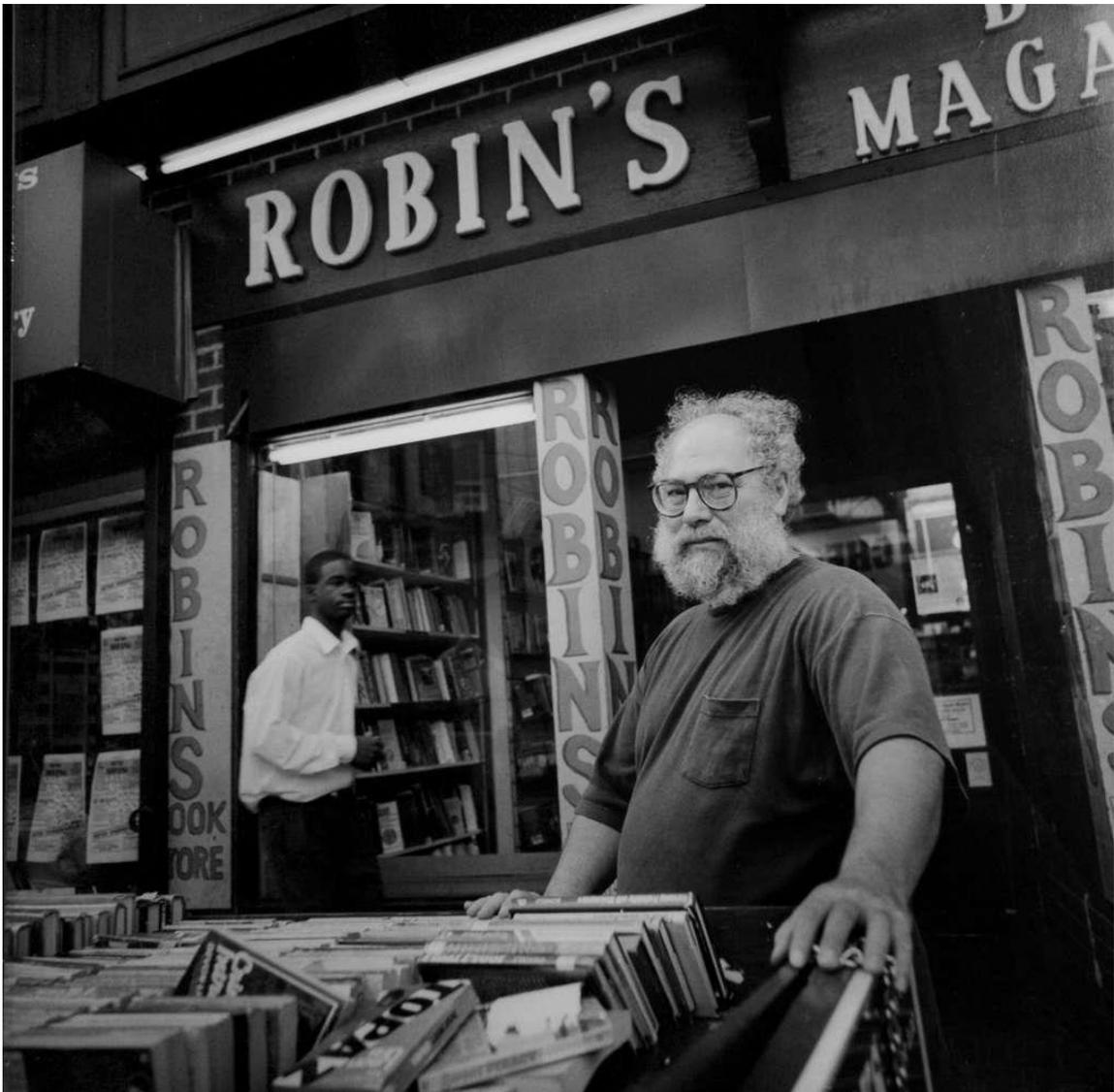


Figure 3.15: Robin and his bookstore at 13th and Market St., 1960.
Source: *the Philadelphia Inquirer*.

¹²⁸ Johnson, "Bookselling.," "Ghost Signs of Philadelphia.," "Hasting's Books," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 30, 1965; "Walnut Book Store Going out of Business", *George D. McDowell Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Photographs, Temple Digital Collections*, 1974, accessed March 2025, <https://digital.library.temple.edu/digital/collection/p15037coll3/id/3558/>.

3.2.3 Urban Renewal and the Market East Transformation (1960s–1980s)

From the 1950s to the 1970s, urban renewal efforts, led by city planner Edmund Bacon, sought to modernize Center City by razing older buildings, clearing “blighted” areas, and constructing large-scale commercial and residential developments.¹²⁹ One of the most significant projects was Market East (Market East Boundaries: North: Arch Street, South: Chestnut Street, West: Broad Street, East: 6th Street), envisioned as the commercial redevelopment counterpart to Penn Center, which had primarily focused on office spaces. In 1958, the Philadelphia Planning Commission introduced a proposal for a multifaceted urban complex that included: A shopping district designed to compete with suburban malls, aiming to revitalize downtown retail.¹³⁰

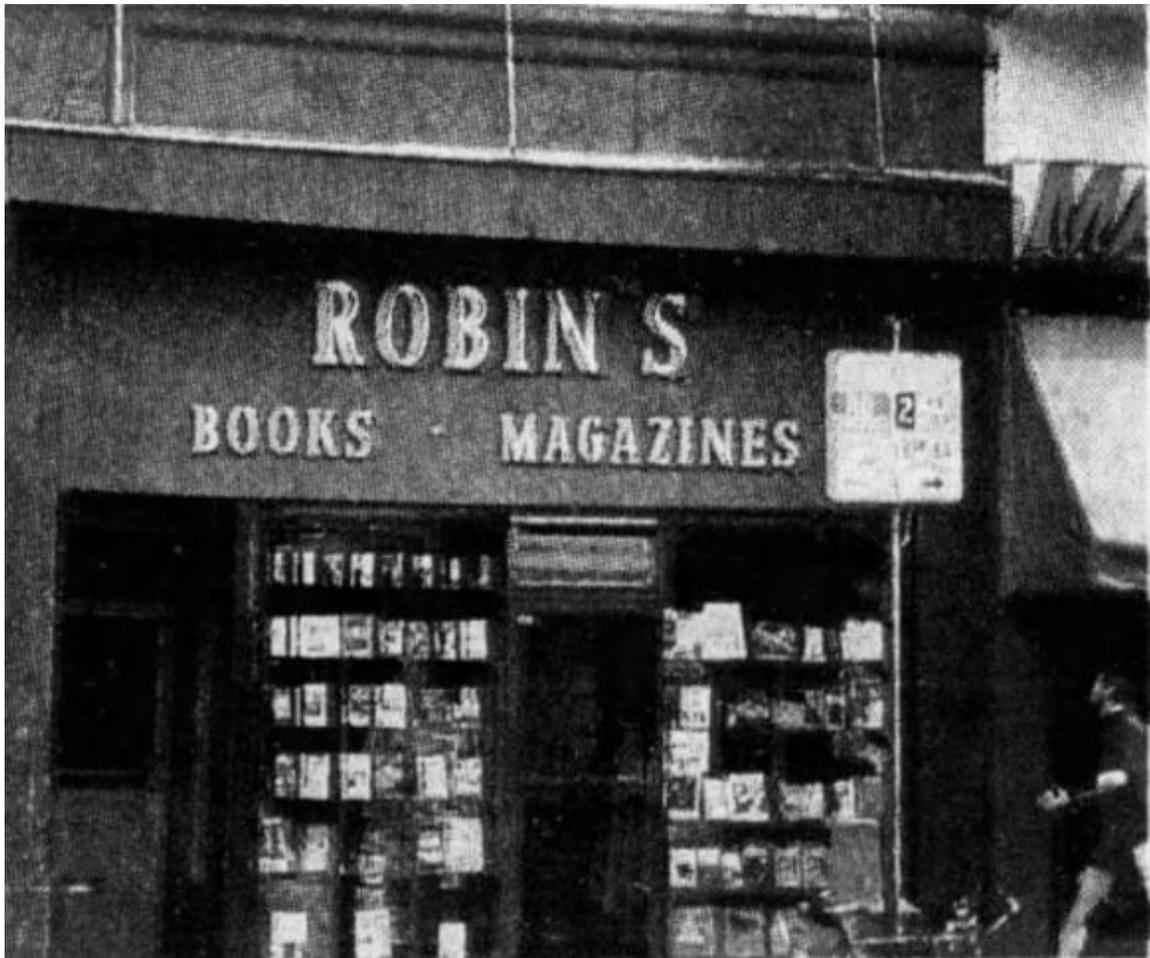
As property values and rents soared, small bookstores struggled to survive in center city, while national chain retailers and shopping malls moved in, pushing out long-established local businesses. Many legacy bookstores disappeared from the Center City landscape during this period: Leary’s Bookstore, once the oldest bookstore in the country, closed in 1969, Walnut Bookstore, a neighborhood staple, shut down in 1974, Hasting’s Books, which had served the community for decades, closed its doors in 1978.

Despite these challenges, Robin’s Bookstore endured, thriving as a radical bookstore fueled by the counterculture movement since 1960s. During its peak in 1980, Robin’s expanded to four locations, including one at 1837 Chestnut St.(Figure 3.16) and

¹²⁹ Nathaniel Popkin, “Ed Bacon, In Perspective,” Hidden City Philadelphia, May 3, 2013, accessed March 2025, <https://hiddencityphila.org/2013/05/ed-bacon-in-perspective/>.

¹³⁰ Ammon, “Urban Renewal.”

another in the Reading Terminal Market (Figure 3.17), reflecting its growing influence as a hub for alternative literature and activism.¹³¹



*Figure 3.16: Robin's satellite bookstore at 1837 Chestnut St. in 1991.
Source: The Republican Newspaper*

¹³¹ Carlin Romano, "Robin's Bookstore Opens a New Chapter," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 16, 2009.

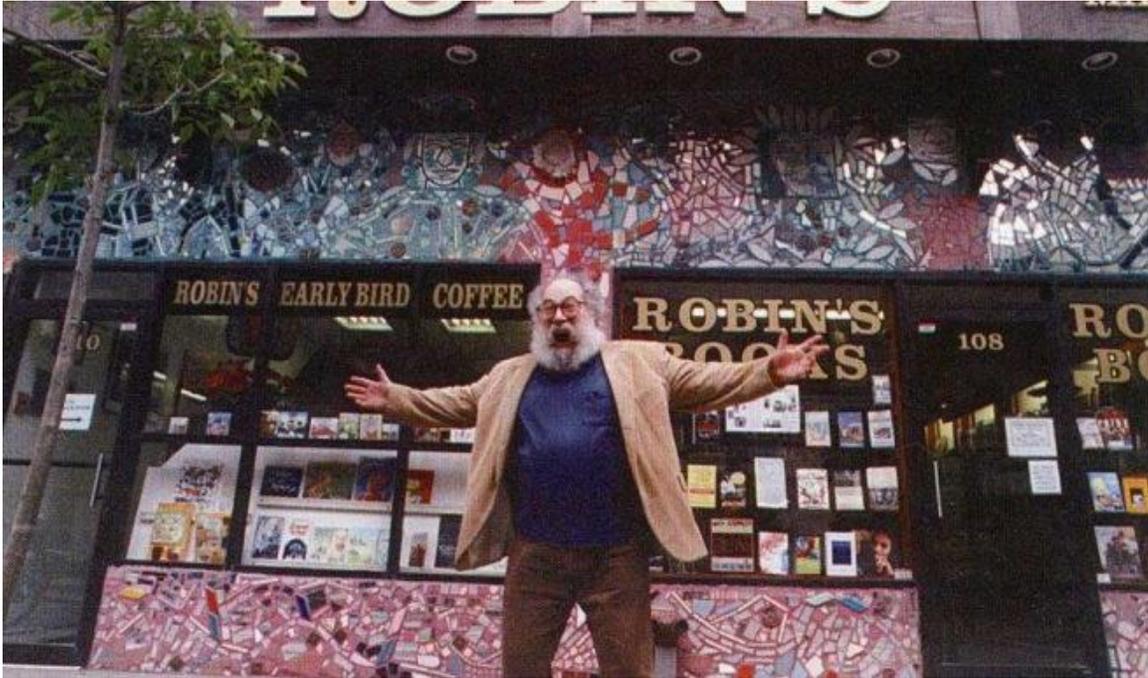


*Figure 3.17: The last day of Robin's satellite bookstore at Reading Terminal Market in 1992.
Source: Philadelphia Daily News*

In 1981, Robin's Bookstore (main store) relocated to its final home at 108-110 S. 13th St., gaining enough space to expand its mission beyond bookselling. With two floors, the bookstore established the Moonstone Arts Center on the second floor (Figure 3.19), dedicated to poetry readings, open discussions, and political speakers, further solidifying Robin's as a cultural and intellectual hub in the community.¹³² At the time, Larry's also operated a small coffee corner, "Robin's Early Bird Coffee," when the area had few coffee shops (Figure 3.18). However, as corporate coffee chains flooded Center City in the 1990s, Robin decided to shut it down. "I love books," he said. "I don't love

¹³² Ahsan, "Robin's Reaches Final Chapter."

food service.”¹³³ Unlike many merchants who chased profits and followed trends, Robin remained steadfast in his literary mission, ensuring the bookstore remained a space for ideas rather than commercialization.



*Figure 3.18: Robin's Early Bird Coffee in the bookstore at 13th and Sansom St., 1983.
Source: the Philadelphia Inquirer.*

¹³³ Diane Mastrull, "Philadelphia's Robin's Bookstore Is Closing Its Doors," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 29, 2008.



Figure 3.19: Moonstone Art Center on the second floor of 108-110 S. 13th St., 2012.
Source: <https://foursquare.com/v/robins-bookstore-and-moonstone-arts-center/4bb66fae1344b713b7819d04>

3.2.4 The 1990s–2000s: Gentrification, Chains, and the Decline of Robin’s

As large chain bookstores gained market dominance in the 1990s, Robin’s Bookstore struggled to compete against the rise of corporate booksellers. In response to this uncertain and unstable period, Robin launched *Poetry Ink* in 1996, a reading and publishing program designed to foster literary community and engagement. At the first *Poetry Ink* gathering in 1996, local poets rallied around Robin’s Bookstore, sending out chain letters urging people to support the store. The response was overwhelming. One hundred poets showed up, and everyone bought a book. Poet Eleanor Wilner reflected on the moment, saying: “We crossed all the lines in this city that are supposed to be borders

and are not. I just think of it as a place that erases border and supports free speech on every level.”¹³⁴

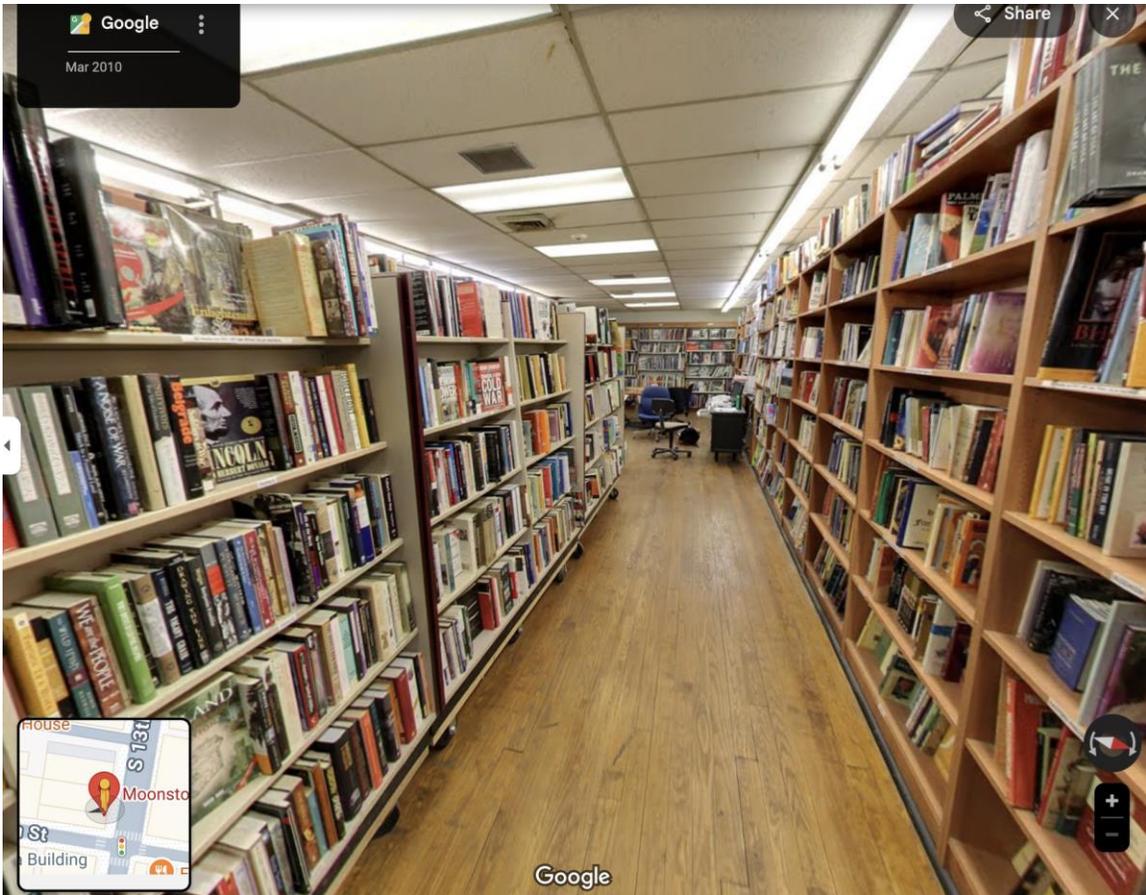
But the community’s voice never stopped the bookstore from losing money year after year since around 1982.¹³⁵ In 2007, Robin’s Bookstore downsized, closing all its satellite locations, and leasing out the first floor to a new tenant. The store ceased selling new books in around 2009, transitioning into a used bookstore and cultural space operating solely on the second floor (Figure 3.20). After 76 years in business, Robin’s Bookstore closed its doors in 2012, marking the end of an era for Philadelphia’s independent bookselling scene. However, its spirit endured through Moonstone Arts Center, which remained on the second floor of 108-110 S. 13th St, continuing Robin’s legacy of fostering literature, social activism, and cultural engagement. Reflecting on the transition, Robin acknowledged the loss of an essential connection to emerging voices:

I could do Moonstone best because I had the book connection... I would find someone in a catalog, call them, and say, “I see you have a new book coming out—do you want to do a program?” Now, I will lose that connection with emerging voices because I don’t have the mechanism to find them. I regret that. I don’t know how to replace it.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Stephan Salisbury, “Moonstone Arts, Home to Philly’s ‘Democratic Rebels of Literature,’ Has Invited 300 of Them to a Poetry Reading,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 17, 2021.

¹³⁵ Ahsan, “Robin’s Reaches Final Chapter.”

¹³⁶ “Robin’s Books Ends Final Chapter in Philly,” *WHYY* (blog), December 20, 2012, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://whyy.org/articles/robins-books-ends-final-chapter-in-philly/>.



*Figure 3.20: Interior of Robin's Bookstore on the second floor of 108–110 South 13th Street, 2010.
Source: Google Maps Street View.*

Robin may have stepped away from the book business, but he remained deeply involved in the culture business in this city. As the bookstore closed and Moonstone Arts Center transitioned into a full-fledged nonprofit, it continued to thrive. Today, Moonstone produces around 100 programs annually—primarily poetry readings—and publishes approximately 30 poetry collections a year. Unlike the bookstore, which relied on retail sales, Moonstone operates through a nonprofit funding model supported by grants from arts foundations, public humanities councils, private donations, and modest income from ticketed events and poetry collection sales. This diversified funding base has enabled Moonstone to sustain its mission-driven programming and preserve key elements of

Robin’s activist and literary legacy, even without the bookstore’s commercial infrastructure.¹³⁷

3.2.5 Values Preserved, Lost, or Transformed: From Bookstore to Arts Center

With the disappearance of Robin’s brick-and-mortar bookstore, Philadelphia lost a valuable physical space for free and serendipitous literary exploration. Notably, there are now no bookstores within a 500-meter radius of City Hall—a civic and symbolic heart of the city. Robin’s Bookstore, located at 108–110 South 13th Street, was just 200 meters away and once occupied a culturally significant site in a district now dominated by restaurants, retail outlets, and gift shops. Its closure represents not only the loss of a community-centered bookstore, but also a diminishment of the city’s cultural and intellectual landscape at one of its most visible and historic locations. For decades, it had been a point of civic pride to have a legacy bookstore near City Hall—an anchor of literary and political life in the urban core. The store’s absence marks a clear loss in both spatial and symbolic value, reflecting broader trends in urban redevelopment that prioritize commercial consumption over cultural infrastructure.

However, while the physical and retail aspects of Robin’s were lost, many of its cultural and social values have been preserved—and in some respects, even amplified—through the ongoing work of Moonstone Arts Center. As the nonprofit that emerged from the bookstore’s legacy, Moonstone continues to foster open intellectual and artistic spaces through a robust calendar of literary programming. One of the most enduring

¹³⁷ “Moonstone Arts Center,” accessed March 15, 2025, <https://moonstoneartscenter.com/>.

traditions carried over from the bookstore era is its inclusive approach to poetry readings, which dates to the 1980s. Unlike curated or juried events, Moonstone’s readings remain open to anyone in the city, with participants scheduled alphabetically by the initials of their names. As Larry Robin has explained, this format was designed to challenge expectations and hierarchies, allowing emerging voices to be heard alongside seasoned poets. The most rewarding moments, he recalled, came when a first-time poet—nervous and trembling—stood before an audience to share their work aloud, transforming the space into one of vulnerability, affirmation, and collective expression.¹³⁸

This tradition continues today, sustained by Moonstone’s regular poetry events, workshops, and publications. In this way, the center has preserved the bookstore’s most essential legacy: its commitment to inclusive literary culture and public dialogue. As Larry Robin, now in his eighties, devotes his energy more fully to poetry and community engagement than to bookstore operations, the transition to a nonprofit model appears both sustainable and appropriate. Moreover, Moonstone provides opportunities for internships and volunteer work, offering a valuable platform for the next generation of writers and literary advocates in Philadelphia.¹³⁹

3.2.6 Conclusion

The case of Robin’s Bookstore underscores the complexities of preserving legacy business in a rapidly evolving urban and cultural landscape. While the physical space and

¹³⁸ Philadelphia Press Spotlight, “Larry Robin and Moonstone Press”, YouTube video, 2022, accessed March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFFmiXyzln0>.

¹³⁹ “Moonstone Arts Center.”

commercial functions of the bookstore ultimately could not withstand the combined pressures of center city's rising rents and shifting retail dynamics, the core values that defined Robin's—community engagement, political discourse, and literary inclusivity—did not disappear. Instead, they were transformed and rechanneled through the nonprofit Moonstone Arts Center, which continues to serve as a platform for poetry, education, and social justice-oriented programming.

Robin's Bookstore represents a different kind of legacy preservation—one that foregrounds institutional transformation over architectural survival. Its story reveals that when economic or spatial continuity becomes unsustainable, legacy values may still endure through adaptation, reinvention, and programming. However, this model also has limitations: the closure of Robin's as a bookstore marked a significant loss of browsing culture and spontaneous discovery—features that Moonstone, as an event-centered nonprofit, cannot fully replicate.

By highlighting both the losses and continuities in Robin's trajectory, this case study demonstrates that legacy bookstores possess layered forms of value—commercial, spatial, symbolic, and social. Preserving these values may require flexible strategies that acknowledge not just the buildings or business models, but also the intangible missions and relationships that bookstores cultivate over time. In this way, Robin's invites us to consider how preservation efforts can support alternative forms of cultural continuity, even when physical space is no longer viable.

3.3 Case study 03: The Book Trader

3.3.1 Introduction

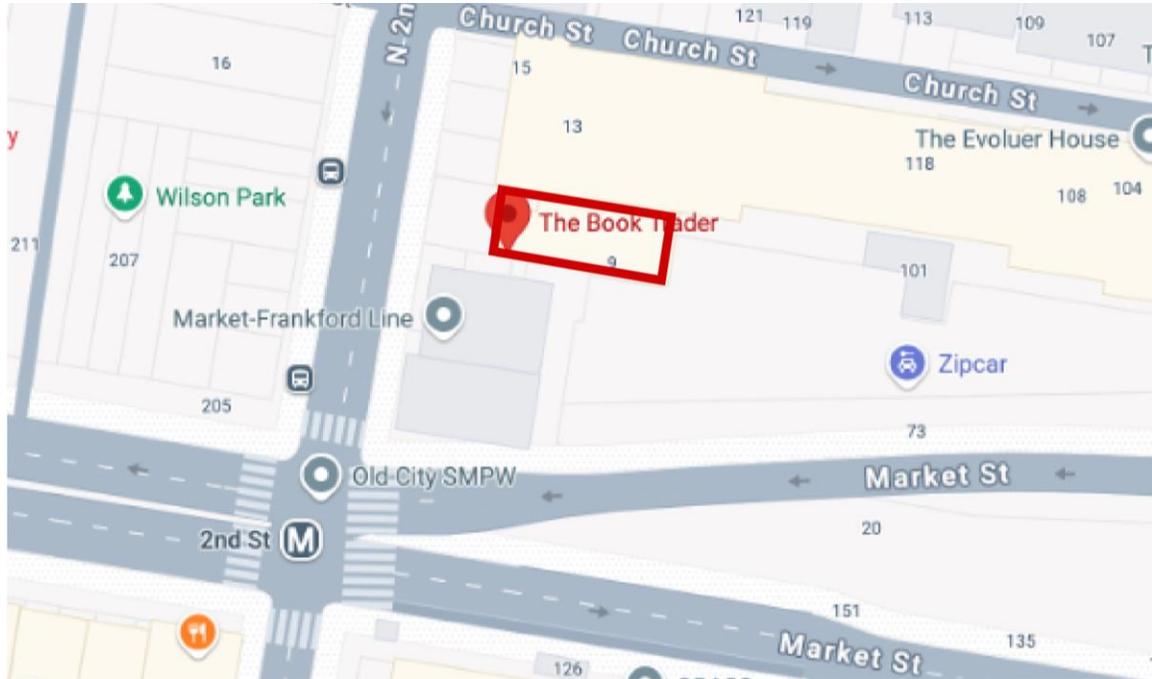


Figure 3.21: Location of the Book Trader at 7 N 2nd Street. 2025.
Source: Google Maps.

Founded in 1975 by Peter Hiller, The Book Trader is the most popular used bookstore in this city currently located at 7 North 2nd Street in Philadelphia’s Old City (Figure 3.21, Figure 3.23).¹⁴⁰ After beginning on South Street during the city’s wave of countercultural retail in the 1970s, the store relocated to its present site in 2004—anchoring itself in one of the most historically significant and heavily toured districts in the United States (Figure 3.22).¹⁴¹ Its survival as a low-margin, secondhand business in such a high-rent environment is a rare case of resilience, illustrating how legacy

¹⁴⁰ Jamie McClelland, “Philly’s 6 Best Used Bookstores,” *Green Philly* (blog), February 12, 2020, accessed March 2025, <https://greenphl.com/philly/phillys-6-best-used-bookstores/>.

¹⁴¹ Linda K. Harris, “South St. Is Losing a Storied Institution,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 10, 2004.

bookstores can coexist with tourism and commercial redevelopment when embedded in a walkable, heritage-rich setting.

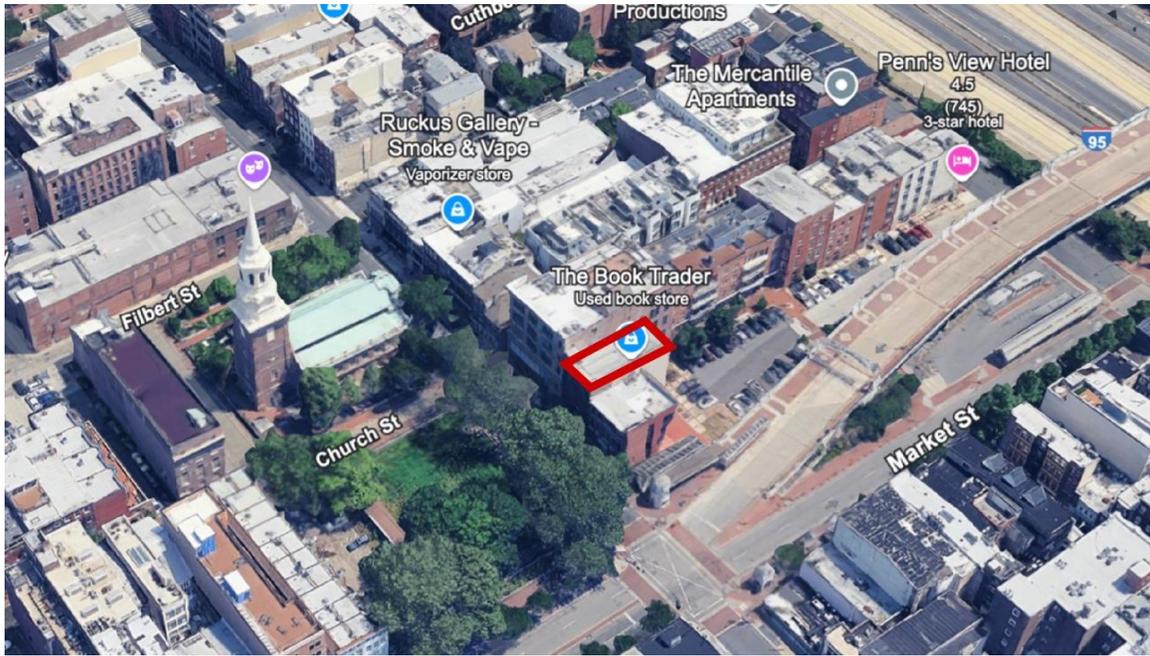


Figure 3.22: *The Book Trader at 7 N 2nd Street situated among row houses, 2025.*
Source: Google Maps and Google Earth.

The store's Old City location places it within a federally designated National Historic District, surrounded by landmarks such as Independence Hall, the Betsy Ross House, and Elfreth's Alley.¹⁴² While many legacy businesses struggle to compete with modern retail or become displaced by rising rents, the Book Trader benefits from steady foot traffic and a customer base that includes both dedicated locals and international tourists. This hybrid audience has allowed it to maintain a rotating, high-volume inventory that spans fiction, art, history, philosophy, and local interest, often sold at accessible prices. The store's multiple levels and floor-to-ceiling stacks offer a tactile and

¹⁴² Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Nomination of Old City Historic District to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places*, (Philadelphia Historical Commission, 2003), accessed January 2025. <https://www.phila.gov/media/20190213125332/Historic-District-Old-City.pdf>.

serendipitous browsing experience increasingly rare in the age of algorithm-driven consumption.



*Figure 3.23: Front elevation of the Book Trader, 2025.
Photograph by the author.*

Crucially, the Book Trader illustrates a gap in preservation frameworks: although located within a protected historic district, the store itself receives no formal cultural or economic recognition. It exemplifies a legacy business whose value lies not only in architectural features, but also in its long-term contribution to the street-level character, intellectual diversity, and experiential landscape of Philadelphia’s oldest neighborhood. This case study examines how strategic location, adaptable business practices, and

understated cultural presence have enabled the Book Trader to persist and thrive where others have vanished.

3.3.2 South Street's Transformation and The Book Trader's Departure

The Book Trader originally opened at 501 South Street in 1975 (Figure 3.24), during a period of transformation.¹⁴³ Initially threatened by a proposed Crosstown Expressway in the 1950s, the South St. area suffered declining real estate values and business closures as merchants fled. However, by the late 1960s, African American community leaders like George T. Dukes and Alice Liscomb successfully led efforts to block the expressway, preserving the neighborhood. Meanwhile, South Street's eastern blocks experienced a cultural revival, spurred by the opening of the Theatre of the Living Arts (TLA) in 1964, which attracted artists, performers, and a growing countercultural scene. With new galleries, cafés, and bookstores, South Street became a vibrant hub for creatives, setting the stage for the Book Trader's establishment.¹⁴⁴

Before opening The Book Trader, Peter Hiller worked at The Frog, located at 1521 Sansom Street—Philadelphia's first nationally recognized restaurant, which played a pivotal role in the city's culinary renaissance.¹⁴⁵ The Frog's owner, Steve Poses, was strongly influenced by Jane Jacobs' ideas on urban vitality and community-building. He envisioned restaurants not merely as places to dine, but as inclusive social spaces where

¹⁴³ Harris, "South St. Is Losing a Storied Institution."

¹⁴⁴ Gottlieb, "South Street."

¹⁴⁵ Suzi Nash, "Stellar Book Seller," *Philadelphia Gay News*, May 30, 2013, <https://epgn.com/2013/05/30/22749688-stellar-book-seller/>.

people from all walks of life could gather.¹⁴⁶ This philosophy resonated with the broader cultural revival unfolding in Philadelphia during the 1970s and left a lasting impression on Hiller.¹⁴⁷ The same spirit of experimentation and inclusivity helped shape South Street’s transformation into a hub for alternative businesses, including feminist bookstores, natural food co-ops, and LGBTQ+ spaces. In 1973, Giovanni’s Room—a pioneering bookstore serving Philadelphia’s gay community—opened at 232 South Street.¹⁴⁸ Alongside the Book Trader, these businesses contributed to the district’s identity as an eclectic, artistic, and socially conscious enclave.



Figure 3.24: Peter Hiller at his desk inside *The Book Trader*, 501 South Street, circa 1977.
Source: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center.

¹⁴⁶ Craig LaBan, “With Frog’s Kitchens Closed, Restaurant Legend Steve Poses Turns to Politics,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 30, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Nash, “Stellar Book Seller.”

¹⁴⁸ “Giovanni’s Room: The Booksellers Who Built a Community.”

During the 1980s and 1990s, South Street’s alternative scene gained mainstream recognition. Newspapers and magazines celebrated its unique culture, attracting more visitors and upscale businesses. With rising rents and shifting demographics, national chains like McDonald’s, The Gap, Starbucks, and KFC moved in, gradually transforming South Street from a countercultural enclave into a commercial district catering to wealthier residents from nearby Bella Vista and Queen Village.¹⁴⁹

As South Street’s character changed, The Book Trader found itself at odds with its evolving surroundings. Ever-rising rent, declining foot traffic from its original audience, and financial challenges—exacerbated by external factors like the war in Iraq—made it difficult for the bookstore to survive in its longtime location. Eventually, Hiller made the strategic decision to relocate to Old City in 2004 (Figure 3.25), which was underdeveloped with much cheaper rent, a move that ultimately strengthened The Book Trader’s business but marked the end of an era for South Street.¹⁵⁰

South Street’s transformation follows a familiar pattern seen in many neighborhoods in this city: as an area declines, rents drop, attracting artists who revitalize the community and make it desirable again. This, in turn, draws real estate developers who bring in high-paying tenants like national chains and upscale restaurants, gradually erasing the very character that made the neighborhood unique. By the 1990s, many locally owned shops had disappeared on South St., and what was once “the hippest street in town” had essentially become a mall. By the 2000s, some chains had begun to leave, leaving South Street in a peculiar limbo—no longer a vibrant cultural hub, yet not distinct enough to be a true destination.¹⁵¹ Will the same cycle of gentrification and decline play

¹⁴⁹ Gottlieb, “South Street.”

¹⁵⁰ Peter Hiller (Owner of the Book Trader), interviewed by author, February 2025.

¹⁵¹ Ashley Primis, “What to Do About South Street,” *Philadelphia Magazine* (blog), May 6, 2018, accessed March 2025, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2018/05/05/south-street-philadelphia/>.

out in Old City, where The Book Trader now resides?



Figure 3.25: Peter Hiller overseeing a sale at 501 South Street, before the relocation, 2004. Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer.

3.3.3 From South Street to Old City: The Book Trader and the Evolution of a Historic District

Peter Hiller relocated The Book Trader to 7 N 2nd St. in 2004, a decision he later admitted should have been made much earlier, according to the author's interview.

Hesitant to leave South Street, Hiller struggled with the decision, deeply attached to his original customer community despite facing persistent financial difficulties. His reluctance to relocate prolonged his hardships, leaving him to navigate an increasingly unsustainable business environment on South Street.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Hiller, interview.

However, the new Old City location ultimately proved to be a strategic improvement, placing the bookstore in the heart of the district with significantly increased foot traffic. Situated just a two-minute walk from the 2nd St. subway station, the location offered better accessibility while alleviating Old City’s notorious parking challenges. The bookstore’s presence in a pedestrian-friendly environment further enhanced its visibility and visitor engagement. As Hiller noted in the interview, “Many visitors are even from Jersey or Baltimore, as we have great transportation.”¹⁵³ This transition positioned The Book Trader as a destination bookstore, benefiting from both local and regional visitors drawn to Old City’s revitalized cultural landscape.

Hiller’s decision to relocate also reflected the Old City’s undergoing significant transformation. When The Book Trader moved to Old City in 2004, the neighborhood was experiencing a renaissance, fueled by tax incentives and the financial advantages of restoring historic structures over new construction.¹⁵⁴ This transformation mirrored the bookstore’s initial move to South Street in 1975, when the area—defined by urban decay—became a refuge for artists, musicians, and independent businesses, largely ignored by major investors and developers at the time. However, The Book Trader’s transition into Old City unfolded under very different circumstances. Unlike South Street’s organic creative revival, Old City’s redevelopment was shaped by preservation policies as a nationally registered historic district, leading to a more structured and incentivized transformation, distinct from the bookstore’s earlier experience.

¹⁵³ Hiller, interview.

¹⁵⁴ Gregory R. Byrnes, “An Old Area Rehabilitated into a New Life,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 8, 1983.

In the interview, Hiller explained his rationale for relocating, stating that “this area was not yet developed in 2004, had low rent, and might become a tourist spot.”¹⁵⁵ His instincts were aligned with Old City’s economic transformation, which had been unfolding over the past few decades. Once the commercial core of Philadelphia, Old City had declined significantly after 1870, leaving behind deteriorating buildings, vacant lots, and urban decay. However, its fortunes began to change when the Old City Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.¹⁵⁶ At the time of its listing, Old City still suffered from abandonment, vandalism, and a struggling economy, but this designation laid the foundation for its revitalization.

Initially, artists and craftspeople were among the first to repopulate Old City, drawn by its affordable rents, industrial lofts, and 19th-century architectural charm.¹⁵⁷ Just four years after Old City received its national historic designation, the federal government introduced the Investment Tax Credit (ITC) for historic preservation through the Tax Reform Act of 1976, offering financial incentives for restoring historic buildings.¹⁵⁸ These incentives were significantly expanded under the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981, which introduced tiered tax credits: 25% for buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, 20% for non-historic buildings over 40 years old, and 15% for those over 30 years old. Although the Tax Reform Act of 1986 later reduced

¹⁵⁵ Hiller, interview.

¹⁵⁶ Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Nomination of Old City Historic District*.

¹⁵⁷ Byrnes, “An Old Area Rehabilitated into a New Life.”

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Congress, “H.R.10612 - Tax Reform Act of 1976” (1976), accessed January 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/94th-congress/house-bill/10612>.

these rates, it made the credits permanent for certified historic structures and established the 20% Historic Tax Credit (HTC) still in use today.¹⁵⁹

The impact of these tax credits was evident. By 1983, the Old City had become one of Philadelphia's most sought-after real estate markets, with developers, city officials, and residents recognizing its transformation. David Segal, head of data services for the City Planning Commission, noted that the Old City's population nearly tripled from 1970 to 1980, growing from 225 to 656 residents. By 1983, the estimated population had reached 1,500.¹⁶⁰

However, this rapid transformation was not without tensions. Many of the artists and craftsmen who had settled in the Old City during the early 1970s were gradually displaced as rising rents and increasing property values reshaped the district. As the area became more desirable, it attracted a growing number of mature commercial establishments, including art galleries, boutique stores, and specialty businesses. This shift catered to the affluent young professionals moving into the neighborhood—residents who prioritized living space over family-oriented housing units.¹⁶¹ Undoubtedly, The Book Trader found favor among this new demographic.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Congress, "H.R.4242 - Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981" (1981), accessed January 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/4242>.

¹⁶⁰ Byrnes, "An Old Area Rehabilitated into a New Life."

¹⁶¹ Byrnes.

3.3.4 Spatial Curation and Architectural Integration

As the first bookstore to join Old City’s wave of urban renewal, The Book Trader quickly became a cultural anchor, bridging the neighborhood’s 19th-century Renaissance Revival architecture with its renewed cultural vitality. According to the National Register nomination for the Old City Historic District, the building at 7–9 N. 2nd Street—home to The Book Trader, is classified as a contributing structure. It is described as a “four-story, three-bay, brown brick, Late 19th-Century Renaissance Revival building with storefront... Built: c. 1890.”¹⁶² This designation makes the property eligible for preservation incentives under the National Register of Historic Places, including the 20% Federal Historic Tax Credit.¹⁶³

The Book Trader benefited from this tax credit when relocating to Old City in 2004 and undertook a thoughtful restoration to adapt the space into a bookstore.¹⁶⁴ The renovations were subtle and respectful of the building’s historic character: second-floor windows were modestly restored to improve interior lighting, and the entrance door was redesigned to increase visibility into the store while maintaining a restrained, historically sensitive presence. A small sign on the door and sidewalk book displays further signaled its identity to pedestrians without overwhelming the streetscape (Figure 3.26). This low-key design approach reflects the adaptability of second-hand bookstores and their potential to integrate seamlessly into preserved historic environments, contributing to the district’s cultural vibrancy while respecting its architectural legacy.

¹⁶² Philadelphia Historical Commission, *Nomination of Old City Historic District*.

¹⁶³ U.S. Congress, “H.R.4242 - Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981.”

¹⁶⁴ Hiller, interview.



*Figure 3.26: Entrance of The Book Trader with a customer browsing outside, 2025.
Photograph by the author.*

Upon entering The Book Trader, visitors are immediately drawn to a prominent postcard display and the old store signage (from its old South St. store) hanging above the counter—intentional features designed to appeal to tourists, given Old City’s popularity as a visitor destination (Figure 3.27). The surrounding shelves are densely packed with books, interspersed with CDs and comic books, creating a sense of discovery that is both delightful and slightly overwhelming. The store’s interior is eclectic and layered; the main desk, nearly hidden beneath stacks of books and small antiques, makes it difficult to spot the staff or even owner Peter Hiller (Figure 3.28). In contrast to the warm, conversational atmosphere cultivated by Debbie Stanford at House of Our Own, the environment at The Book Trader is quieter and more reserved. When visitors inquire

about a specific title, the most common response is a simple, “You can go to the second floor and have a look around,” reinforcing the store’s self-guided, exploratory spirit.¹⁶⁵

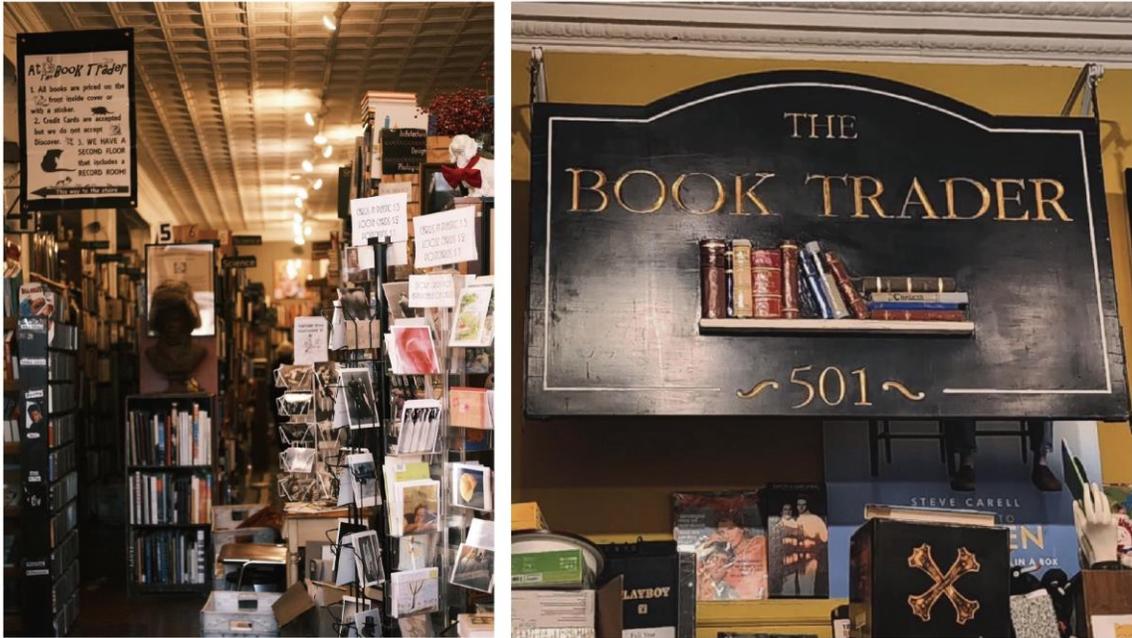


Figure 3.27: Left: Postcard display at the entrance of The Book Trader. Right: Original signage from its former South Street location, now mounted behind the counter. Photographed by the author, 2024.

Navigating the aisles at The Book Trader feels even more crowded than at House of Our Own, largely due to the higher volume of foot traffic. To minimize congestion and create a more navigable space, Hiller has thoughtfully placed directional markers indicating one-way walking paths, helping guests avoid awkward encounters in the narrow corridors (Figure 3.29 left). Small chairs are occasionally tucked between shelves, inviting readers to pause and browse without pressure (Figure 3.29 middle). No one interrupts or asks you to leave for lingering too long. There is no obligation to make a purchase, nor is conversation expected. On the second floor, a larger lounge area offers a

¹⁶⁵ Hiller, interview.

more relaxed atmosphere, with cushioned seating and floor-to-ceiling windows that fill the room with natural light (Figure 3.29 right)—reminiscent of the upstairs reading space at House of Our Own (Figure 3.9).



Figure 3.28: Staff member at The Book Trader's front counter, 2024. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3.29: Left: Ground floor shelves with a “one-way” directional marker on the floor. Middle: Small chairs tucked between shelves. Right: Lounge area on the second floor, 2025. Photograph by the author.

One interesting aspect of The Book Trader’s spatial evolution becomes clear when comparing its current layout in Old City to the original store on South Street. When Peter Hiller first opened the bookstore, he had not yet accumulated the vast inventory it holds today. As a result, the ground floor of the original location was relatively open and uncluttered (Figure 3.30), offering a more spacious browsing experience. Over time, as the store’s collection grew and its identity as a secondhand bookstore deepened, the spatial aesthetic transformed. The current dense and layered interior reflects this long-term accumulation, creating an atmosphere that feels both overwhelming and rich with discovery. It is precisely this sense of abundance—combined with the patina of age and continuity—that gives The Book Trader the distinctive aesthetic of a historic used bookstore: one shaped not by design trends, but by decades of lived experience and evolving stock.



Figure 3.30: Ground floor view of the Book Trader at 501 South Street, 1977.
Source: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center.

In terms of book selection, The Book Trader primarily builds its inventory through donations, allowing individuals to contribute books in exchange for store credit.¹⁶⁶ Given the volume of donations in a city like Philadelphia, the stock is vast but varied in quality. The first floor features an abundance of history and travel books from around the world (Figure 3.31). However, compared to House of Our Own, the historical and war-related sections here are broader in scope but less thematically curated, often lacking the depth or scholarly focus found in more intentionally selected collections. The second floor houses a large selection of popular fiction and comic books, reflecting the

¹⁶⁶ “The Book Trader | Old City District,” *Old City District*, 2021, accessed March 2025, <https://www.oldcitydistrict.org/business/book-trader>.

store's appeal to a broader and more casual reading audience. This composition underscores The Book Trader's position within a more accessible, mass-market tier of the used book landscape—serving a wider public, though sometimes at the expense of thematic coherence.



Figure 3.31: The bookshelves on the ground floor of the Book Trader, 2025. Photograph by the author.

This case underscores how spatial curation in legacy bookstores is not static but responsive shaped by historical accumulation, user interaction, and shifting cultural and economic pressures. In The Book Trader's case, architectural integration is not merely a backdrop, but part of the lived experience of used-book browsing. It illustrates how such spaces contribute to the layered palimpsest of the city, where cultural heritage is

preserved not only in bricks and mortar, but in the rhythms, routines, and rituals of daily use.

3.3.5 Limited NGO Support and the Vulnerability of Cultural Businesses

One of the advantages of The Book Trader’s location in Old City is its proximity to local civic and nonprofit initiatives aimed at fostering a vibrant and inclusive commercial district. Within the Old City Special Services District, business owners, preservation advocates, and community groups work together to support cultural heritage and small business development.¹⁶⁷ As bookstore owner Peter Hiller noted, “Old City District helped—a little bit—though they charged,” suggesting that while support exists, it is limited in both scope and financial benefit.¹⁶⁸

Events like the annual Philadelphia Book Crawl, organized by a local nonprofit, have further contributed to the visibility of independent bookstores across the city.¹⁶⁹ Through these types of collaborations, The Book Trader participates in a broader network of civic literary culture. Yet, despite this participation, the store remains largely self-reliant, receiving modest but not transformative support from these initiatives. These connections may help sustain public engagement and foot traffic, but they fall short of offering long-term structural protections or economic relief.

Although the building that houses The Book Trader is a contributing structure within the Old City Historic District, this benefit accrues to the landlord, not the tenant.

¹⁶⁷ “The Book Trader | Old City District.”

¹⁶⁸ Hiller, interview.

¹⁶⁹ “The Philadelphia Bookstore Crawl,” accessed April 2025, <https://www.phillybookstorecrawl.com>.

As a result, the bookstore does not directly benefit from these preservation incentives and remains vulnerable to rising commercial rents. The historic designation protects the architectural features of the building, ensuring its long-term conservation, but it offers no safeguards for the cultural business within. There is no requirement to maintain a bookstore—or any cultural use—on the premises. Should a higher-paying tenant emerge, the property owner could easily replace the Book Trader without violating any preservation guidelines.

As the Old City continues to gentrify and attract tourist-driven commercial development, longstanding cultural institutions face increasing pressure. Despite its contributions to the city’s literary life and its modest support from nonprofit networks, the Book Trader remains vulnerable to displacement.

3.3.6 Conclusion

The Book Trader offers an example of how a legacy used bookstore can endure in a rapidly evolving urban landscape by adapting to spatial, economic, and cultural shifts. Its survival is due not to institutional protection or strong external funding, but to a combination of willingness to relocate strategically, low operational costs, architectural integration, and cultural embeddedness in a high-foot-traffic historic district. While its presence benefits from some support through civic initiatives like the Old City District and events such as The Book Crawl, these networks offer limited protection against broader structural pressures like rent inflation and commercial turnover.

Unlike other legacy used bookstores that foreground an overtly political or ideological mission, the Book Trader’s value lies more in its atmospheric richness and

accumulated cultural capital. It represents a living archive shaped by years of book donations, dense spatial curation, and steady public engagement. While it may lack the institutional support or mission-driven curation found in places like House of Our Own, it sustains a unique vitality through its everyday accessibility—offering an unpretentious, open-ended browsing experience in the heart of a tourist-driven neighborhood.

However, its future remains precarious. Historic designation protects the building but not the business, the tax credits benefit landlords, not tenants. As Philadelphia’s Old City continues to evolve into a more tourist-oriented and commercially competitive district, The Book Trader’s ability to remain will depend not just on its legacy status but on policy innovation—ones that recognize the cultural significance of enduring small businesses as part of the city’s living heritage.

Ultimately, the Book Trader illustrates the quiet resilience of secondhand bookstores that adapt without abandoning their identity. And similar to the House of Our Own, its story highlights the importance of designing preservation strategies that acknowledge not only architecture, but also use, atmosphere, and the social values embedded in everyday commerce.

3.4 Comparison Findings

This section synthesizes the findings from the three case studies—House of Our Own, Robin’s Bookstore, and the Book Trader—to identify key similarities, differences, and recurring patterns across their trajectories. While each store’s survival or transformation was shaped by distinct factors (ownership, location, operating

philosophy), their collective experiences provide a comparative lens for understanding what makes legacy used bookstores unique. The discussion is structured around two dimensions: **(1)** how used bookstores differ from new independent bookstores in spatial logic, inventory practices, sensory experience, and business models; and **(2)** how they fit within the broader category of legacy small businesses, facing shared pressures such as rising rents, displacement, and cultural undervaluation. Woven through these comparisons are four observations that highlight why legacy used bookstores should be regarded as living heritage. The comparative insights developed here serve as a bridge between empirical observation and policy intervention, offering a critical foundation for rethinking how cities, institutions, and communities can support the long-term continuity of culturally significant small businesses.

3.4.1 Used bookstores as a category of independent bookstores

While used bookstores are often grouped under the umbrella of independent bookstores, the case studies demonstrate that they operate according to a distinct set of spatial, economic, and cultural logics. These differences shape the customer experience and long-term viability of used bookstores, especially in the face of urban redevelopment and rising commercial rents. Four aspects in particular – scale, curation, accessibility, and atmosphere – distinguish legacy used bookstores from their new-book counterparts and underscore their role as community-rooted heritage.

A. Scale and space utilization

One of the most defining distinctions is scale and space utilization. Used bookstores typically require a much larger physical footprint than new independent bookstores, due to the volume and fluctuating nature of their inventory. Unlike curated new bookstores, which can manage stock through selective ordering and streamlined supply chains, used bookstores must display a wide and constantly shifting selection of secondhand titles—acquired through donations or buybacks—onsite. This results in substantial demands for floor space, storage, and shelving.

For example, Iffy Books, a small independent bookstore in Center City, operates within a lot size of just 630 square feet, demonstrating how small, curated independent bookstores can thrive in compact urban locations. In contrast, House of Our Own occupies a 2,906-square-foot lot with a total improvement area of 3,780 square feet, using a two-story Victorian rowhouse to create dense yet navigable browsing spaces. The Book Trader, although situated on a 2,086-square-foot lot, utilizes approximately 4,000 square feet across two levels of retail space. These examples show that scale is not a luxury for used bookstores—it is a functional necessity.¹⁷⁰

This spatial requirement introduces a distinct urban constraint: while both used and new independent bookstores rely on visible, street-level locations, used bookstores often require larger and more affordable properties. As commercial rents continue to rise in gentrifying areas, securing such spaces becomes increasingly difficult. New bookstores, by contrast, can survive in smaller, carefully designed units with fewer titles

¹⁷⁰ The floor area data is sourced from the City of Philadelphia’s property assessment records. <https://property.phila.gov/>.

and highly curated offerings. Used bookstores must accommodate volume, turnover, and informal browsing habits, often in older or repurposed buildings that allow for more flexible spatial arrangements.

Some newly opened independent bookstores have managed to operate at a larger scale, but they typically do so through hybrid business models and favorable location choices. American Grammar, opened in 2023 and located in Kensington, occupies a 4,784-square-foot lot. This ambitious footprint is financially feasible because the store incorporates coffee sales, event programming, and merchandise into its operations. Its location in Kensington, a neighborhood with lower commercial rents than Center City or Old City, also reduces overhead costs.¹⁷¹ This hybrid model reflects a new generation of bookstores that rely on diversified revenue streams and community-driven programming to sustain their operations.¹⁷²

However, such models are often incompatible with the ethos and operational demands of traditional used bookstores. Introducing a café or large event space is not only difficult to manage in an already crowded used bookstore, but it can also compromise the quiet, introspective, and serendipitous atmosphere that defines the used book experience.¹⁷³ These stores cultivate a sense of discovery, nostalgia, and retreat—qualities that do not easily align with the social and often noisy environment of a coffee shop.

¹⁷¹ “American Grammar - Coffee | Art | Books.”

¹⁷² The floor area data is sourced from the City of Philadelphia’s property assessment records. <https://property.phila.gov/>.

¹⁷³ Hiller, interview.

Moreover, the labor required to manage used book inventory is extensive. Every donated or purchased book must be individually evaluated, sorted, priced, and shelved, often with little automation.¹⁷⁴ Maintaining an ever-changing and expansive stock demands not only physical space, but also significant time and specialized knowledge. Staff in used bookstores are more often engaged in continuous inventory processing than in service-oriented roles such as food preparation or event coordination. This labor-intensive model leaves little room to support additional commercial activities, making the pursuit of a hybrid business strategy both impractical and misaligned with the store's operational rhythms.

In short, while large-scale independent bookstores do exist, they typically depend on relatively low rent, diversified revenue, and a curated retail experience in newer commercial settings. Used bookstores, by contrast, operate under a different economic and cultural paradigm—one rooted in accumulation, accessibility, and literary history. Their survival depends not only on entrepreneurial ingenuity, but on access to affordable space, sympathetic property owners, and preservation frameworks that recognize their unique social and spatial contributions.

B. Book Selection and curation

Used bookstores also offer a book selection and curation model fundamentally different from that of new bookstores (or online retailers like Amazon). Instead of featuring only the latest titles and bestsellers, a legacy used bookstore presents a layered

¹⁷⁴ Hiller, interview.

archive of past reading habits and intellectual movements. The inventory in these shops spans decades, creating a browsing experience of discovery and surprise. Patrons don't always come with a specific title in mind; rather, they wander and encounter books serendipitously, often uncovering out-of-print or obscure works in the process. This open-ended, time-traveling form of browsing is possible only because used bookstores carry an abundance of stock that newer stores (with their precision-curated inventories) and libraries (with active weeding of old books) typically cannot afford to maintain.

This abundance of older, eclectic stock is made possible by how used bookstores source their inventory. Rather than purchasing new books from publishers at wholesale prices, they rely on the local community for a steady supply of used books, obtained at minimal or no cost. Store owners buy books in bulk from estate sales, accept walk-in drop-offs, or trade credits with regular customers.¹⁷⁵ As a result, the inventory acquisition model is deeply community-dependent: the surrounding neighborhood effectively co-curates the collection by donating and selling books it no longer needs.

The case studies illustrate this reliance on walkable communities. House of Our Own, for instance, benefits from its proximity to a large academic population that feeds the store a stream of scholarly books and international titles, while the Book Trader's long tenure in Philadelphia's urban core means it has absorbed countless personal libraries from generations of local readers. Because most secondhand titles are acquired so cheaply, used bookstores can afford to retain a wide variety of books, including those of niche interest or dated appeal that would be economically unviable in a new-bookstore.

¹⁷⁵ Hiller, interview.

Indeed, most used books are priced only around a few dollars, which lowers the opportunity cost of keeping slower-selling titles on the shelf.

This low-cost, high-volume inventory strategy not only supports the serendipitous browsing experience, but it also reinforces the archival role of used bookstores in the literary ecosystem. As a result, these stores function as informal public archives where past literary culture remains accessible: they preserve ephemera and out-of-print works that might otherwise disappear, and they make the history of reading tangible to new generations.

Crucially, because so much of a used bookstore's stock comes directly from its patrons and neighbors, the collection in each store reflects the neighborhood's history and changes over time. When communities evolve, their bookstores evolve in parallel. Robin's Bookstore, for example, operated in Center City for over seventy years and became a witness to the city's cultural and economic changes, mirroring them on its shelves. As Philadelphia underwent mid-century urban renewal and later waves of social change, Robin's responded by expanding its collection beyond general literature to include more provocative and socially relevant works.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, House of Our Own's two-floor labyrinth of books ranges from radical 1970s treatises to contemporary graphic novels, effectively mapping fifty years of local reading trends and conversations. Unlike a public library, which intentionally curates and periodically purges its collection, a legacy used bookstore tends to accumulate layer upon layer, shaped by time and by informal dialogues between readers and booksellers. The result is a grassroots archive of

¹⁷⁶ Ahsan, "Robin's Reaches Final Chapter."

reading history – a living collection co-created by the community. Every donated book, every conversation about a title, and every decade that passes adds another stratum to this archive. Far from being frozen in the past, the archive is continually refreshed by the community even as it preserves memories of earlier eras.

Another hallmark of used bookstores' curation is their ability to serve niche and underrepresented communities through this flexible model. Because their financial investment in stock is minimal, used bookstores can take risks on specialized materials and cater to minority audiences without needing a guaranteed high sales volume. This makes them more responsive to demographic shifts and cultural changes in their locale.

A vivid example is House of Our Own's adaptation to the growing Chinese population in University City. Noticing an influx of Chinese students and scholars in the neighborhood, the owners expanded their selection of books in Chinese and about Chinese literature and architecture, to the point that House of Our Own is now one of the most welcoming places for Penn's Chinese students to find books in their native language. The owner, Debbie Sanford, even began learning Mandarin to better communicate with customers, underscoring the store's commitment to inclusivity.¹⁷⁷ This kind of inventory adaptation would be far riskier for a new bookstore (which would have to invest capital in new foreign-language stock), but for a used bookstore it happens organically as the community offers books and expresses interest. In turn, the Chinese student community has become an essential source of support for the bookstore's continued vitality – a reciprocal relationship that exemplifies a living heritage of cultural

¹⁷⁷ Sanford, interview.

exchange.¹⁷⁸ The low-cost, community-curated model gives these legacy stores a grassroots agility to meet local needs, be it a sudden demand for Chinese-language books or a resurgence of interest in say, vinyl records guides or African history. In short, their economic flexibility translates into cultural inclusivity.

Finally, the ethos of used bookstores emphasizes affordability and access in a manner that connects to a long urban tradition of making literature publicly available. Nearly all legacy used bookstores practice some form of ultra-low-cost or free book offering as a community gesture. It is common to see sidewalk carts with \$1 books, clearance racks, or even boxes of free books at the store entrance (Figure 3.32). These humble offerings continue a lineage dating back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, when book peddlers and curbside stalls brought cheap reading material to the masses.¹⁷⁹ In mid-1800s Philadelphia, for instance, Leary’s Bookstore famously billed itself as a “Cheap Book Store” and drew crowds with tables of inexpensive used books displayed out front.¹⁸⁰ That model – stacks of books on the sidewalk inviting any curious passerby – has persisted into the present. The Book Trader, for example, keeps a rolling cart of dollar books outside its Old City shop to lure in pedestrians, and many a Philadelphian has their first encounter with the store by rummaging through those sidewalk deals.

¹⁷⁸ Sanford, interview.

¹⁷⁹ “About Second Hand Books.”

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, “Bookselling.”

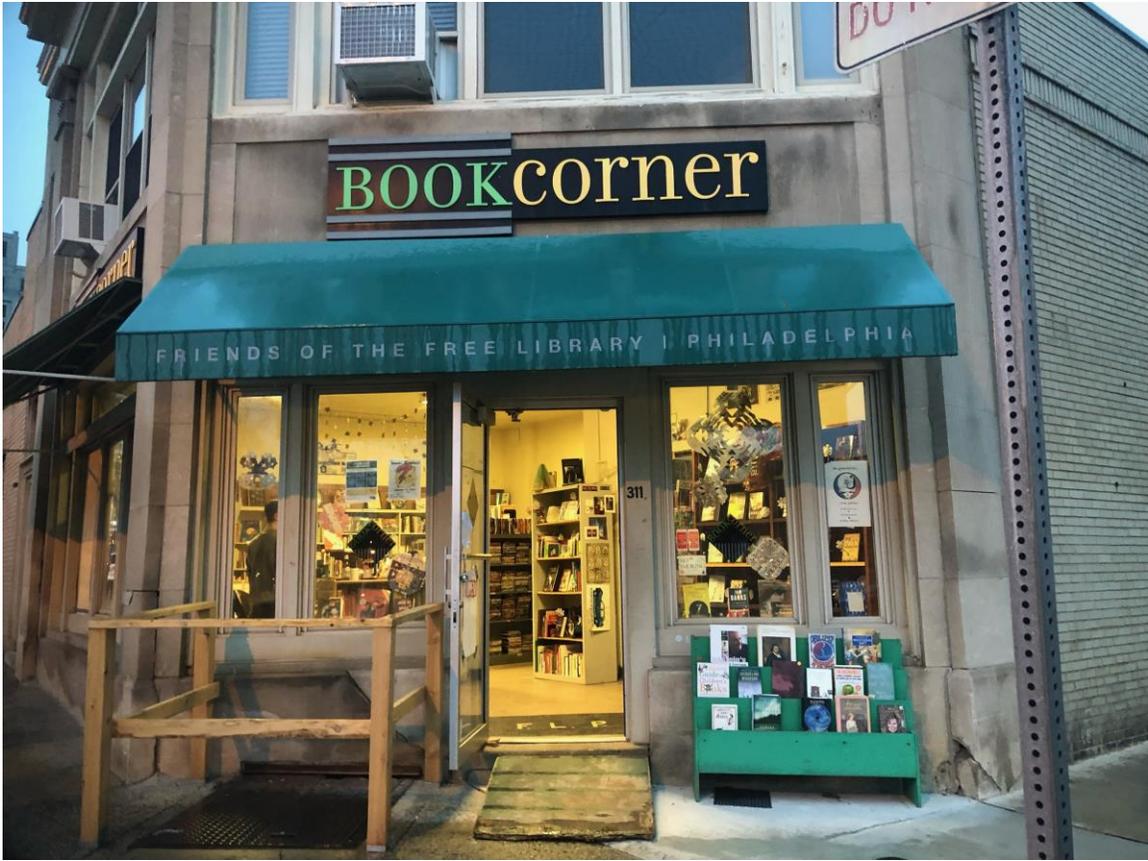


Figure 3.32: The sale books on the shelf in front of Book Corner at 311 North 20th Street.
Source: <https://www.libraryfriends.info/bookcorner>

Such practices reinforce the idea of the bookstore as a public literary common as much as a business. The ultra-low prices remove barriers for people of limited means, while the free book boxes and honor-system shelves (as seen at some stores) cultivate a spirit of sharing and reciprocity. This tradition of accessible literature links these modern stores to their historical predecessors – from the sidewalk bookstalls of Paris to the curbside vendors in American cities who, a century ago, ensured that no eager reader went without a book due to price.¹⁸¹ By carrying this tradition forward, legacy used bookstores actively embody a living heritage of urban literacy. They keep alive the

¹⁸¹ “Paris, Banks of the Seine”, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed June 2024, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/600/>.

practice of exchanging books in public space and democratizing knowledge, knitting the act of reading into the everyday street life of the city.

C. Historic Architecture and the Sensory Experience

Another feature unique to used bookstores is their frequent presence in older, sometimes historic buildings—a spatial condition that significantly enhances the overall browsing experience (Table 2.1). At both House of Our Own and The Book Trader, the architectural character of the building complements the aesthetic and intellectual experience of handling old books. The creak of wooden floors, the narrow staircases, the unpolished walls—all contribute to a sensory environment that evokes time and memory, making the space itself an extension of the books’ historical value.

Importantly, both bookstores occupy formally recognized historic structures. House of Our Own is in a locally registered historic building, while The Book Trader is situated within a contributing structure in the nationally registered Old City Historic District. Though these are currently the only two used bookstores in Philadelphia housed in officially designated historic buildings, their presence underscores a broader pattern: used bookstores exhibit both a spatial preference for and functional compatibility with historic architecture. This alignment not only enables preservation through continued use but also suggests the potential to integrate more legacy bookstores into preservation planning.

This compatibility is further reinforced by the multi-sensory atmosphere that defines many used bookstores, particularly the distinctive smell of old books, a feature often celebrated by booksellers and patrons alike. The scent of aging paper, binding glue,

and ink, technically produced by volatile organic compounds released as books decay, has become a powerful marker of memory and meaning. It evokes childhood library visits, quiet afternoons in secondhand shops, or even specific titles and covers. In literary and collector communities, this phenomenon has a name: bibliosmia. Some describe the smell as musty, others as sweet or even chocolaty, but its emotional resonance is consistent.¹⁸²

This olfactory layer is more than nostalgia, it contributes to the sensory identity of the space and deepens the connection between the building and the books it houses. Powell's Books in Portland once bottled their store's scent as a unisex fragrance—"a labyrinth of books; secret libraries; ancient scrolls."¹⁸³ While commercialized, this gesture recognized that bookstores are not just intellectual sites, but atmospheric environments, and that the physicality of the book interacts meaningfully with the materiality of the building. In a historic structure, that interaction is amplified: old books smell different when housed among old bricks, creaky stairs, and dusted windowsills. The building becomes a container not just for books, but for multisensory memory.

This kind of atmospheric richness is less common in new independent bookstores, which often emphasize modern design and minimalism. Used bookstores align more closely with other vintage-based retail forms—antique shops, record stores, and flea markets—where architectural patina and product aging create a cohesive, immersive aesthetic. In these spaces, preservation is not just a policy—it is a felt experience.

D. Adaptation and risk

¹⁸² Friss, *The Bookshop : A History of the American Bookstore*, 34-35.

¹⁸³ Friss, 34-35.

Despite the cultural and community value outlined above, legacy used bookstores face significant challenges in the contemporary retail landscape. In fact, they are often under-studied and under-supported compared to the new independent bookstores that have enjoyed a recent revival.¹⁸⁴ Trade organizations like the American Booksellers Association primarily serve new-book retailers, leaving used bookstores outside the scope of most industry support and data collection.¹⁸⁵ This lack of institutional representation contributes to the vulnerability of used bookstores. With thin profit margins and informal operational structures, many used bookstores have limited buffers against external shocks. Their continued existence in gentrifying cities can be precarious: rising rents, redevelopment pressure, and the aftermath of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have all disproportionately impacted small, low-margin businesses – bookstores included.

Unlike some new independent bookstores, which have leveraged grants, crowdfunding, and hybrid business models to adapt, used bookstores tend to rely on fragile local networks and deeply rooted community relationships for survival. Their adaptation to changing economic conditions is often slow and incremental. For example, rather than moving or overhauling their business model, an owner may simply tighten budgets, reduce hours, or negotiate month-to-month leases in hopes of riding out tough times. The case studies show that survival often comes down to personal dedication and community goodwill: House of Our Own’s owners’ long negotiation with their landlord

¹⁸⁴ Jake Blumgart, “Independent Bookstores Are Coming Back in Philly, across the U.S.,” *WHYY* (blog), accessed April, 2025, <https://whyy.org/articles/independent-bookstores-are-coming-back-in-philly-across-the-u-s/>.

¹⁸⁵ ABA, “Member Directory in Philadelphia.”

(UPenn) or The Book Trader’s owner resisting relocation until necessary are testament to adaptation born of commitment rather than capital.¹⁸⁶

Yet, the very traits that make used bookstores special – their community integration, archival collections, and historic ambiance – are also what can rally support for them as cultural anchors. The risk of displacement for a beloved bookstore often spurs community action (petitions, benefit events, “save our bookstore” campaigns), because locals recognize that losing such a place means losing a piece of the neighborhood’s heritage.¹⁸⁷ This is why some city preservation initiatives and cultural heritage conversations are beginning to include legacy businesses alongside landmarks.¹⁸⁸ The comparative insights here highlight that preserving a used bookstore is not simply about saving a retail business; it is about sustaining a living, community-based culture. In the next section, we consider used bookstores through the lens of legacy business preservation more explicitly, but the takeaway in this comparative context is clear: used bookstores occupy a distinct niche where economic viability and cultural value intersect. Ensuring their endurance requires approaches outside the standard market logic – approaches that treat them as living heritage sites rather than just as interchangeable storefronts.

¹⁸⁶ Hiller, interview; Sanford, interview.

¹⁸⁷ “On Penn Campus, a Textbook Case of Market Forces at Work.”

¹⁸⁸ City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation, “Legacy Business Program,” accessed April 2025, <https://www.sanantonio.gov/historic/LivingHeritage/LegacyBusiness>.

3.4.2 Legacy used bookstores as a category of legacy small businesses

Seeing legacy used bookstores as legacy small businesses highlights another facet of their identity: they share many challenges with other long-standing mom-and-pop establishments, yet they also exhibit unique dependencies on cultural institutions and community bonds. The case studies illustrate how ownership models and external partnerships can make or break the long-term survival of these bookstores, and how their preservation often hinges on values beyond the balance sheet.

A. Ownership and Institutional Relationships

The long-term survival of legacy used bookstores is deeply shaped by their ownership models and institutional relationships. Among the clearest examples is House of Our Own, which has operated for decades out of a university-owned Victorian rowhouse adjacent to the University of Pennsylvania campus. According to owner Debbie Sanford and Greg Schirm, the bookstore reached an agreement with Penn in recent years that allows it to remain in the building until their retirement, with favorable rental terms.¹⁸⁹ This arrangement is not part of a formal preservation or legacy business initiative, but rather the product of long-term negotiation and mutual recognition of the store's cultural contribution to the university community. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Penn further demonstrated its support for small businesses by offering reduced rent to help tenants endure the economic downturn.¹⁹⁰ This action highlights the critical

¹⁸⁹ Sanford, interview.

¹⁹⁰ Sanford, interview.

role academic institutions can play in sustaining small businesses as part of broader placemaking and community-building strategies.

A similar case is The Last Word Bookstore, located at 220 South 40th Street, just a few blocks west of the University of Pennsylvania campus. The store was opened in 2013 by Larry Maltz, a longtime bookseller with a passion for secondhand literature and literary conversation. Like House of Our Own, The Last Word leases its space from the University of Pennsylvania, benefiting from a location embedded within a student- and faculty-rich environment. In 2006, when Penn undertook a major redevelopment of the 3900 block of Walnut Street—the bookstore’s former location—most tenants were displaced to the outskirts of campus. However, recognizing The Last Word’s strong customer base and contribution to the street’s cultural vitality, the University offered it a favorable relocation site. This decision highlights the role academic institutions can play in sustaining independent cultural businesses as part of broader placemaking and community-building strategies. Although not yet a legacy business, with only twelve years of history, The Last Word’s continued presence in a university-owned property reflects Penn’s ongoing efforts to foster a vibrant, intellectually oriented cultural district in West Philadelphia.¹⁹¹

These examples suggest that used bookstores, particularly those that align with academic, literary, or community-oriented values, are more likely to receive structural support when situated within or near large educational institutions. Such support may not

¹⁹¹ Ali Mariam, “In the Stacks of Last Word Bookshop,” accessed April 2025, <https://www.34st.com/article/2025/01/last-word-bookstore-larry-maltz-philadelphia-books-cat>.

be formalized through municipal legacy business designations but is instead secured through ongoing relationships and shared cultural priorities.

Another illustrative case is Book Corner, a nonprofit bookstore operated in partnership with the Free Library of Philadelphia since 1991. While it does not qualify as a small business in the traditional sense, its integration into a public cultural institution provides a compelling model for how used bookstores can be supported outside the private market. Book Corner's nonprofit structure ensures that it serves a public mission, promoting literacy and access to affordable books, while benefiting from the visibility, space, and operational stability that comes with its affiliation with the Free Library.¹⁹² Though atypical, this case underscores how legacy used bookstores can thrive when embedded in broader civic ecosystems.

In contrast, Robin's Bookstore operated under private ownership, which allowed for independence and political programming but also entailed greater financial risk. After purchasing its property at 108 South 13th Street in around 2001, the Robin family navigated decades of financial challenges, including multiple rounds of borrowing and mortgage refinancing.¹⁹³ Ultimately, the business closed in 2012, transitioning into the nonprofit Moonstone Arts Center. While Robin's legacy persists in cultural programming, its closure as a commercial bookstore reflects the precarity of privately owned legacy businesses without institutional backing.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² "Book Corner Friends of the Free Library Bookshop," accessed March 2025, <https://bookshop.org/shop/bookcornerphilly>.

¹⁹³ The property data is sourced from the City of Philadelphia's property assessment records. <https://property.phila.gov/>.

¹⁹⁴ Ahsan, "Robin's Reaches Final Chapter."

These contrasts point to an important distinction: legacy used bookstores tend to rely more heavily on institutional landlords or partnerships with cultural organizations than other legacy businesses. While food service businesses or bars may be more visible in city-run legacy business programs—for example, the San Francisco Legacy Business Program, which includes many restaurants but also lists iconic independent bookstores like City Lights and Green Apple Books.¹⁹⁵ Used bookstores in most cities are not systematically recognized or supported. Instead, their preservation often depends on long-term relationships, cultural alignment, and behind-the-scenes negotiation.

B. Adaptation and risk

As a specific category of legacy businesses, used bookstores face many of the same threats that plague all long-established small enterprises in changing cities. Gentrification, e-commerce competition, and shifting consumer habits have thinned the ranks of independent bookstores of all kinds. Rising commercial rents and the loss of foot traffic in once-bustling areas were cited in all three case studies as ongoing concerns. The Book Trader’s history dramatizes this point: it was essentially priced out of its original location on South Street as that corridor gentrified, forcing a relocation to Old City in 2004 where it again must balance being in a trendy district with remaining economically viable.¹⁹⁶ In this sense, legacy bookstores share a fate with many other legacy businesses (like diners, music shops, or craft stores) that struggle to survive the “upgrade” of their surroundings.

¹⁹⁵ City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation, “Legacy Business Program.”

¹⁹⁶ Harris, “South St. Is Losing a Storied Institution.”

However, what sets the bookstores apart is the cultural loss that accompanies their closure. When a legacy bookstore shuts down, the community loses not just a store but a cultural anchor – a space of knowledge, sociability, and historical continuity. This makes the case of protecting them even more compelling. The challenges they face highlight the need for creative adaptation. Some adaptations are internal: for instance, each storeowner has had to decide how much to modernize (Should we sell online? Use social media? Renovate or leave it quaint?).¹⁹⁷ Other adaptations require external support: negotiating sustainable lease terms, seeking designation as a historic or cultural landmark, or tapping into city legacy business funds if available.

The cases examined suggest that strategies used to sustain legacy bookstores—institutional partnerships, community advocacy, and leveraging historic character—can inform broader efforts to protect culturally meaningful small businesses. As such, used bookstores serve as indicators for how cities might preserve local identity amid economic transformation.

3.4.3 Conclusion

Considering the above, it becomes clear that legacy used bookstores exemplify a form of living heritage within the urban landscape. Each of the four dimensions examined—their reliance on and reflection of walkable communities, their function as grassroots archives of literary memory, their inclusive and adaptive inventory practices, and their continuation of historic traditions of accessible book-selling—demonstrates that

¹⁹⁷ Sanford, interview; Hiller, Interview.

these spaces are not static relics, but dynamic, evolving cultural institutions. They maintain relevance through sustained use, community interaction, and organic adaptation, aligning closely with the contemporary preservation concept of living heritage, which values continuity of use and the capacity to evolve alongside the communities they serve.

What this section also reveals is that the preservation of legacy used bookstores offers a transferable framework for safeguarding other culturally significant, small-scale enterprises. The strategies explored in the next section—such as negotiating mission-aligned tenancy agreements, cultivating historically compatible atmospheres, and advocating for inclusion in legacy business or preservation programs—are not limited to bookstores alone. They offer scalable, adaptable models for sustaining a wide range of legacy small businesses that play vital roles in maintaining cultural continuity and community identity in rapidly changing urban environments.

4 Preserving Legacy Used Bookstores: Strategies for Future Endurance

Legacy used bookstores in Philadelphia – exemplified by House of Our Own, Robin’s Bookstore, and the Book Trader – face spatial, economic, and symbolic challenges to their survival. Rising rents and redevelopment threaten their spatial continuity, while competition and market pressures undermine their economic viability. Symbolically, these stores carry rich cultural and community significance that is often undervalued by traditional retail metrics. Recognizing them as living heritage reframes their preservation as a public cultural concern rather than a private commercial struggle.

According to ICCROM, living heritage is heritage kept relevant by continuity of use, ongoing community connection, and continuous care by its community.¹⁹⁸ Building on this understanding, this section draws on insights from the case studies to outline strategies for ensuring the long-term endurance of legacy bookstores. These strategies are organized into four key areas: (1) documentation and interpretation, (2) NGO and cultural collaboration, (3) institutional tenancy models, and (4) policy advocacy. Each strategy addresses specific threats and aligns with the living heritage approach by ensuring that bookstores remain actively used, community-supported, and cared for over time.

(1) Documentation and Interpretation: Documenting and interpreting the history of legacy bookstores is a foundational strategy to reinforce their cultural value. By recording stories, displaying heritage, and educating the public, documentation addresses the symbolic challenge – the risk that a bookstore’s significance will be forgotten or ignored. All three case studies underscore the power of storytelling in preservation.

¹⁹⁸ Gamini Wijesuriya, *Living Heritage*, in *Sharing Conservation Decisions: Current Issues and Future Strategies*, ed. Alison Heritage and Jennifer Copithorne (ICCROM, 2018), 43.

House of Our Own has discussed creating in-store exhibits to communicate its rich history, such as wall-mounted timelines of key events and photo displays of past gatherings.¹⁹⁹ This kind of on-site interpretation transforms the bookstore into a house museum of itself, deepening patrons' appreciation of its legacy. The Book Trader similarly could establish a "heritage corner" in the shop with archival photos, milestone timelines (e.g., its founding in 1975 and South Street era), and customer anecdotes, framing the business as a historic cultural institution rather than just a retail outlet. Such efforts not only honor the past but also engage current visitors in the ongoing story of the place.

In addition to physical displays, digital documentation amplifies a bookstore's reach. House of Our Own, for example, can incorporate historical narratives into its website or social media, sharing archival images and long-time customer memories. By doing so, the store extends its living heritage to a broader community and invites public participation (e.g., crowdsourced photo archives or oral history submissions). Oral history projects are a valuable interpretive tool: House of Our Own could formally collect stories from alumni, employees, and neighbors, preserving personal memories that define the store's intangible heritage. The Book Trader has considered inviting patrons to contribute recollections online or in a dedicated in-store guestbook.²⁰⁰ These narratives humanize the bookstore's history and reinforce the continuity of community connections across generations.

¹⁹⁹ Sanford, interview.

²⁰⁰ Hiller, interview.

Documentation and interpretation directly support the living heritage status of these bookstores. By keeping historical knowledge in active use – through exhibits, storytelling panels, walking tours, or published histories – the community continually engages with the bookstore’s heritage. This approach echoes ICCROM’s emphasis on continuity of a site’s original function and community bonds.²⁰¹ A bookstore that interprets its own past remains in dialogue with that past, educating new generations about its cultural role and thus ensuring the past lives on in the present.

The strategy also has practical benefits: a well-documented legacy business can leverage its history for heritage recognition and marketing. For instance, compiling a detailed timeline and significance statement is a first step toward pursuing historic designation (such as a National Register nomination) or heritage grants. It also distinguishes the bookstore’s brand – tourists and locals are more likely to visit a shop known as a storied landmark. In San Francisco, a similar logic underpins the Legacy Bars and Restaurants program launched by preservationists to highlight historic eateries and pubs. By publicly interpreting these businesses’ histories, San Francisco not only honors them but also raises their profile, rallying support for their preservation.²⁰² Philadelphia could adopt a comparable initiative (a “Legacy Bookstores Trail,” for example) to celebrate and document its literary heritage. In sum, rigorous documentation and creative interpretation fortify the symbolic value of legacy bookstores, building a narrative that

²⁰¹ Wijesuriya, *Living Heritage*, 45.

²⁰² “Curating the City: Legacy Businesses,” LA Conservancy, accessed April 2025, <https://www.laconservancy.org/curating-the-city-legacy-businesses/>.

stakeholders can cite in mobilizing resources and protections for these living heritage sites.

(2) NGO and Cultural Collaboration: The case studies reveal that strong partnerships with nonprofit organizations and cultural institutions can greatly enhance a legacy bookstore’s resilience. NGO and cultural collaboration addresses both economic and social dimensions of sustainability: it can provide financial support or operational assistance (mitigating economic pressures) and deepen community engagement (ensuring social relevance). A notable example is Robin’s Bookstore, which evolved into a cultural nonprofit model. Before its closure in 2012, Robin’s had established the Moonstone Arts Center as an affiliated NGO to host poetry readings and cultural events on-site. Even after the bookstore closed, the nonprofit survived and continues to carry forward the store’s literary mission through citywide programs.²⁰³ These underscores how forming a nonprofit arm can preserve at least the intangible heritage – the community programming and intellectual spirit – of a legacy business. The lesson is that by formalizing their cultural role (e.g., as a literary center, community archive, or educational venue), bookstores can access grants, donations, and volunteer networks available to nonprofits, lessening reliance on volatile retail sales.

Collaborations with cultural institutions are equally crucial. House of Our Own has long thrived on its proximity to the University of Pennsylvania, and future collaboration could be more structured. For example, partnering with Penn’s libraries or relevant departments (history, literature, urban studies) can embed the bookstore into

²⁰³ Stephan Salisbury, “Moonstone Arts, Home to Philly’s ‘Democratic Rebels of Literature,’ Has Invited 300 of Them to a Poetry Reading,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 17, 2021.

academic initiatives. Professors might incorporate the bookstore into curriculum (as a case study or field trip site), and students could undertake projects documenting the store or curating exhibits about its role in Philadelphia’s intellectual life. Such university partnerships offer mutual benefits: the bookstore gains institutional recognition and fresh ideas from students, while the university supports local heritage documentation and enriches its community engagement. Similarly, The Book Trader could collaborate with institutions like Temple University or local high schools – inviting classes to learn about the history of independent bookselling or hosting joint literary events. This kind of cultural collaboration not only educates a new audience about the bookstore’s value but also roots the business more firmly in the community’s cultural ecosystem, making it harder to displace.

Beyond academia, partnerships with arts and heritage nonprofits can mobilize resources for legacy bookstores. Preservation organizations, local historical societies, or arts councils might help secure grants for store preservation or co-sponsor events. In Philadelphia, the Friends of the Free Library’s - Book Corner illustrates the potential of an NGO-run bookstore model: it operates as a nonprofit used bookshop whose proceeds support the public library system. While not one of the three core case studies, Book Corner’s success (established 1991 and still active) shows that a used bookstore can be sustained when its mission aligns with a public good and is backed by an institutional framework.²⁰⁴ Legacy bookstores could seek similar alliances – for instance, a

²⁰⁴ “Book Corner Friends of the Free Library Bookshop.”

community development corporation or neighborhood association might act as a fiscal sponsor to help a beloved bookstore fundraise for renovations or purchase its building.

Likewise, cultural festivals and tourism boards can collaborate to include legacy bookstores in city tours and promotional materials, reinforcing their status as cultural landmarks. All these collaborations increase the community's stake in the bookstore's survival. In living heritage terms, they expand the "core community" of the site—engaging not just loyal customers but also volunteers, scholars, artists, and civic leaders as active custodians of the bookstore's legacy.²⁰⁵ By pooling resources and expertise, NGO and cultural partnerships help ensure that legacy bookstores remain vibrant hubs of community life, not isolated retail ventures.

(3) Institutional Tenancy Models: One of the most challenging threats to legacy bookstores is the instability of leases and the real estate market. Institutional tenancy models offer an innovative solution by securing the bookstore's physical space through ownership or stewardship by a mission-driven institution. In essence, this strategy tackles the spatial and economic vulnerabilities directly: if the building or lease is controlled by an entity committed to preservation (rather than profit-maximizing landlords), the bookstore gains long-term security and affordable rent. The case studies point to possibilities for such arrangements. House of Our Own, for instance, could pursue a historic easement or partnership with the University of Pennsylvania.²⁰⁶ Since the store operates in a university-owned area and has deep ties to Penn, an agreement could be crafted where the university (or a preservation trust) guarantees the bookstore's tenancy

²⁰⁵ Wijesuriya, *Living Heritage*, 45.

²⁰⁶ Sanford, interview.

and historic character. In exchange, the institution might receive tax benefits or public recognition for preserving a cultural asset. This model effectively turns the university into a guardian landlord, aligning the property's management with the bookstore's continuity of use.

Another form of institutional tenancy is incorporation into public property or nonprofit-owned space. Cities have precedents for this: public markets and emporiums often host traditional vendors under charters that require preservation of legacy uses.²⁰⁷ In Philadelphia, one could imagine the city or a philanthropic trust acquiring a threatened bookstore's building to hold it in the public interest (much as land trusts hold land for community gardens or affordable housing). If, for example, a fund had existed to buy Robin's Bookstore's building in Center City, the store might have survived the wave of redevelopment that ultimately displaced it. An approach that has been in practice for decades in Montreal involves community land trusts and development nonprofits extending their mission to include commercial properties, aiming to retain longtime businesses that define neighborhood character.²⁰⁸

Institutional tenancy can also be achieved by relocating the bookstore into spaces operated by sympathetic institutions. For example, a university or public library could offer a legacy bookstore a tenancy within one of its buildings (such as a campus storefront or library lobby), integrating the bookstore into the institution's footprint. This was effectively the case with Book Corner, which found a home adjacent to

²⁰⁷ "Celebrating 40 Years of the Market Foundation," Pike Place Market Foundation, November 10, 2022, accessed April 2025, <https://pikeplacemarketfoundation.org/2022/11/10/40th-history>.

²⁰⁸ "Commercial Community Land Trusts," *All-In Cities*, accessed April 2025, <https://allincities.org/toolkit/commercial-community-land-trusts?>.

Philadelphia's Central Library as part of the library's Friends organization. A legacy bookstore could likewise partner with a museum or cultural center, becoming an "in-house" bookseller that enhances the host institution's offerings (while enjoying rent relief and a guaranteed audience). However, while such hybrid models offer significant advantages, they also involve a change of location, which may weaken the bookstore's historical ties to its original site and community context—an important consideration for place-based heritage preservation. Nonetheless, these hybrid models blur the line between bookstore and cultural institution, reinforcing the idea that these shops are part of the cultural infrastructure. They also invite continuous care: the host institution's stake in the bookstore means ongoing maintenance and support, aligning with the living heritage principle of shared stewardship.

In summary, institutional tenancy models – whether through preservation easements, nonprofit ownership, or hosted locations – directly address the physical preservation of legacy bookstores. By shielding these spaces from purely market-driven turnover, cities can maintain the spatial continuity of heritage businesses, keeping them in their historic urban context. Moreover, this strategy is transferable to other legacy businesses (e.g., an old diner or jazz club could be purchased by a trust or integrated into a civic building to ensure its survival). It exemplifies how thinking beyond conventional landlord-tenant dynamics can embed living heritage enterprises within more durable institutional frameworks.

(4) Policy Advocacy and Legacy Business Programs: Finally, securing the future of legacy bookstores will require policy advocacy to create an enabling environment at the city (or even state) level. While individual efforts and private

partnerships are critical, a broader policy framework can provide systematic protection and resources for all legacy businesses. The case studies demonstrate the need for such advocacy. Owners of House of Our Own and The Book Trader have expressed that Philadelphia lacks formal mechanisms to recognize or assist long-standing businesses.

Advocating for a Legacy Business Program in Philadelphia is a key strategy that arises from these insights. Such a program, inspired by the model pioneered in San Francisco, would officially designate businesses over a certain age (e.g., 30 years) that contribute to local heritage, and offer them support. San Francisco’s Legacy Business Registry, established in 2015, provides not only honorary recognition but also tangible benefits – including grants to legacy businesses and rent subsidies to landlords who agree to long-term leases with those businesses.²⁰⁹ Adopting a similar registry and fund in Philadelphia could directly address the economic challenges legacy bookstores face, by easing rent burdens and providing funds for capital improvements or marketing. It would shift some of the financial pressure off the individual owners, framing their continuity as a public interest.

Policy advocacy also means pushing for preservation tools that go beyond the building-centric focus of traditional historic preservation. For example, the Book Trader’s experience in Old City highlights that being in a historic district protected the building’s facade but not the business itself. Advocates could lobby for a “cultural landmark” designation that recognizes businesses for cultural contributions even if their premises lack architectural distinction. This concept, already used in cities like Buenos Aires

²⁰⁹ City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation, “Legacy Business Program.”

which designates “Notable Bars and Cafés” as part of its heritage program, could be adapted so that a shop like The Book Trader is officially recognized as integral to Philadelphia’s heritage.²¹⁰ Such recognition can then be leveraged for incentives – for instance, extending tax credits or abatements to long-tenured business tenants, not just owners of historic buildings. Currently, historic tax credits in the U.S. primarily benefit property owners; Philadelphia could champion state or local amendments to direct similar relief to legacy businesses operating within historic structures or neighborhoods.

At the national level, policy advocacy for legacy businesses is gaining momentum. Seattle’s city government commissioned a Legacy Business study in 2016 to explore support strategies, noting that unlike some European and Latin American cities, U.S. cities have few programs specifically for legacy enterprises. The study spurred initiatives like multilingual lease education and succession planning toolkits for small businesses.²¹¹ Preservationists and economic development officials across the country are increasingly viewing legacy stores through the lens of intangible cultural heritage, arguing for public intervention to save not just buildings but the living traditions within them. By advocating for policies that treat legacy bookstores as cultural assets, communities affirm that these are spaces of memory, creativity, and identity worth safeguarding. Crucially, these policies are transferable: a grant or tax credit system set up for bookstores would equally assist a 30-year-old bakery or a family-owned theater. The broader goal is to encode in law the principle that longevity and cultural contribution

²¹⁰ “The Notable Bars and Cafés of Buenos Aires,” Google Arts & Culture, accessed April 2025, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-notable-bars-and-cafés-of-buenos-aires/OwWBEZAnvDBAyQ>.

²¹¹ “Curating the City: Legacy Businesses.”

merit protection. This reframes the discussion from private business failure to public cultural loss when a legacy business closes.

In conclusion, the above strategies – documentation and interpretation, NGO and cultural collaboration, institutional tenancy, and policy advocacy – form an integrated approach to sustaining legacy used bookstores as living heritage. They reinforce one another: for example, documentation of a bookstore’s significance strengthens advocacy for policy protection, and an institutional partnership can facilitate richer community programming that bolsters the case for the bookstore’s cultural value. Underlying all these strategies is the recognition that legacy bookstores are more than commercial entities; they are repositories of community memory and engines of cultural continuity.

By applying these strategies, Philadelphia can pioneer a preservation model that keeps beloved bookstores like House of Our Own and the Book Trader thriving, and perhaps even prevent future losses like that of Robin’s Bookstore. Moreover, these approaches can extend to other legacy small businesses – from diners and jazz bars to bakeries – thereby preserving the diverse tapestry of local heritage that defines the city. Ultimately, recognizing legacy used bookstores as living heritage reframes their preservation as a public cultural mission. It asserts that saving a bookstore is not just about propping up a retail venture, but about upholding a community’s historical identity and intellectual soul. In this reframed perspective, the survival of a legacy bookstore becomes a shared civic value – a cause for city policy, institutional support, and collective care – rather than a solitary struggle for a private owner. Such a shift is essential to ensure that these cultural havens endure well into the future, continuing to connect past, present, and future generations through the written word.

While many of the strategies outlined above—such as lease assistance, cultural recognition, and preservation grants—apply broadly to legacy independent bookstores, the case of legacy used bookstores demands special attention. Used bookstores are not just retail spaces; they are living archives that embody the layered processes of collection, reuse, and cultural circulation. Their inventories, built over decades through buying, selling, and community donation, create a dynamic cultural ecosystem that is difficult to replicate elsewhere. Preservation strategies for used bookstores, therefore, must not only safeguard the businesses themselves but also sustain the distinct browsing experiences, trading practices, and grassroots knowledge-sharing that define their cultural value. Protecting these intangible elements is critical to ensuring that legacy used bookstores continue to serve as vibrant nodes of urban memory, intellectual exchange, and community resilience.

Conclusion

Philadelphia's legacy used bookstores are shown to embody both tangible and intangible heritage values while serving as vital cultural infrastructure in the city. The study reveals that these bookstores not only preserve physical elements—historic buildings, traditional shop interiors, and vast collections of secondhand books—but also sustain rich intangible practices such as community traditions, literary memory, and inclusive social spaces. As living heritage sites, they function as grassroots cultural institutions that anchor local identity and intellectual life. Each case study demonstrated a distinct resilience strategy within Philadelphia's changing urban context: one bookstore leveraged long-term community support and an academic ideological mission, another transitioned into a non-profit model to carry forward its cultural role after closure, and a third adapted its business model and atmosphere to thrive in a heritage-rich, high foot-traffic district. These adaptive pathways illustrate how legacy bookstores navigate challenges like gentrification, rising rents, and digital competition while preserving their core values and social roles. In doing so, the research underscores that sustaining such small-scale heritage enterprises requires looking beyond mere architectural preservation to the continuity of use, meanings, and relationships that make them living heritage.

This thesis fills a notable gap in the literature by focusing on used bookstores, a type of cultural-commercial space often overlooked in urban heritage and independent bookstore studies. Through a value-centered preservation lens, the research extends heritage theory to include the full spectrum of values (spatial, historical, social, and economic) that these grassroots businesses embody, thereby expanding how preservation practice can account for intangible and community-centered assets. Furthermore, it offers

a model for integrating grassroots commercial spaces into urban heritage discourse and policy, demonstrating that longstanding local businesses can be recognized and supported as part of the city's cultural patrimony alongside more traditional heritage sites. Looking ahead, the conclusion points to clear avenues for future research: comparative studies in other cities to examine whether similar bookstores fulfill analogous heritage roles, deeper exploration of the intangible cultural-economic practices that enable legacy businesses to endure, and the development of targeted preservation policies or programs for small-scale cultural institutions. Such future work would not only broaden the understanding of legacy bookstores in different contexts but also guide practical strategies to ensure these cultural havens survive as living heritage for generations to come.

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Appendix A-1: List of Used Bookstores in 1990

#	Bookstore Name	Address	Zip	Type	Start Year
1	Sessler's Bookshop	1308 Walnut St	19107	USED	1906
2	William H. Allen Bookseller	2031 Walnut St	19103	USED	1918
3	Reedmor Books	1220 Walnut St	19107	NEW & USED	1928
4	Robin's Bookstore (Main Store)	108 S 13th St	19107	NEW & USED	1936
5	House of Our Own Books	3920 Spruce St	19104	NEW & USED	1971
6	How to Do it	1608 Sansom St	19103	NEW & USED	1973
7	Whodunit?	1931 Walnut St	19103	USED	1976
8	The Book Trader	501 South St	19147	USED	1976
9	Wooden Shoe Books and Records	704 South St	19147	NEW & USED	1977
10	Hibberd's Books	1310 Walnut St	19107	NEW & USED	1987
11	Book & Coffee	E Mt Airy Ave & Germantown Ave	19119	USED	1989
12	Robin's Bookstore (Satellite)	1837 Chestnut St	19103	NEW & USED	1980 (Estimated)
13	Robin's Bookstore (Satellite)	1136 Arch St	19107	NEW & USED	1980 (Estimated)
14	Robin's Bookstore (Satellite)	University City (Address Unknown)	19104	NEW & USED	1980 (Estimated)
15	Warren Art Books	116 S 20th St	19103	NEW & USED	1990 (Estimated)

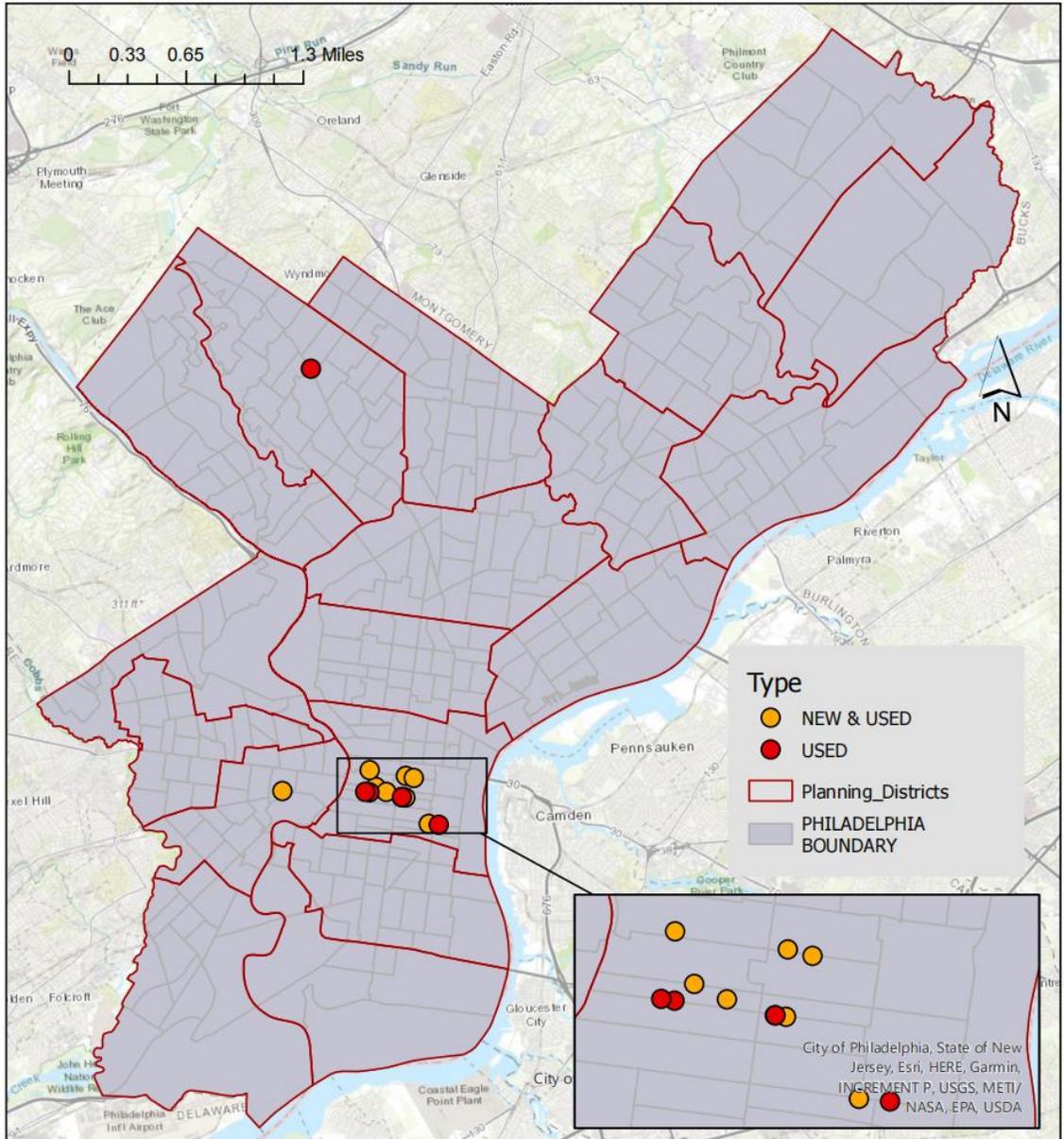
Source: Compiled by the author using the 1990 Philadelphia Yellow Pages, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and interviews with bookstore owners.

Appendix A-2: List of Used Bookstores in 2010

#	Bookstore Name	Address	Zip	Type	Start Year
1	Robin's Bookstore	108 S 13Th St	19107	USED	1936
2	House of Our Own Books	3920 Spruce St	19104	NEW & USED	1971
3	The Book Trader	7 N 2Nd St	19106	USED	1976
4	Whodunit?	1931 Walnut St	19103	USED	1976
5	Wooden Shoe Books	704 South St	19147	NEW & USED	1977
6	Russakoff Jerome MS	259 S 10Th St	19107	USED	1990
7	Book Corner	311 N 20Th St	19103	USED	1991
8	Bookhaven	2202 Fairmount Ave	19130	USED	1994
9	Miscellanea Libri	454 E Girard Ave	19125	USED	1994
10	Walk A Crooked Mile Books	7423 Devon St	19119	USED	1995
11	Molly's Books & Records	1010 S 9Th St	19147	USED	1999
12	Germ Books	2005 Frankford Ave	19125	NEW & USED	2004
13	Mostly Books	529 Bainbridge St	19107	USED	2004
14	Port Richmond Books	3037 Richmond St	19125	USED	2005
15	The Next Page	722 Chestnut St	19106	NEW & USED	2005
16	Tree House Books	1430 W Susquehanna Ave	19121	USED	2005
17	Bindlestiff Books	4530 Baltimore Ave	19143	NEW	2007
18	Brickbat Books	709 S 4Th St	19147	NEW & USED	2009
19	Jules Goldman Books & Records	29 N 2Nd St	19106	USED	2009
20	The Spiral Bookcase	4257 Main St	19127	NEW & USED	2010

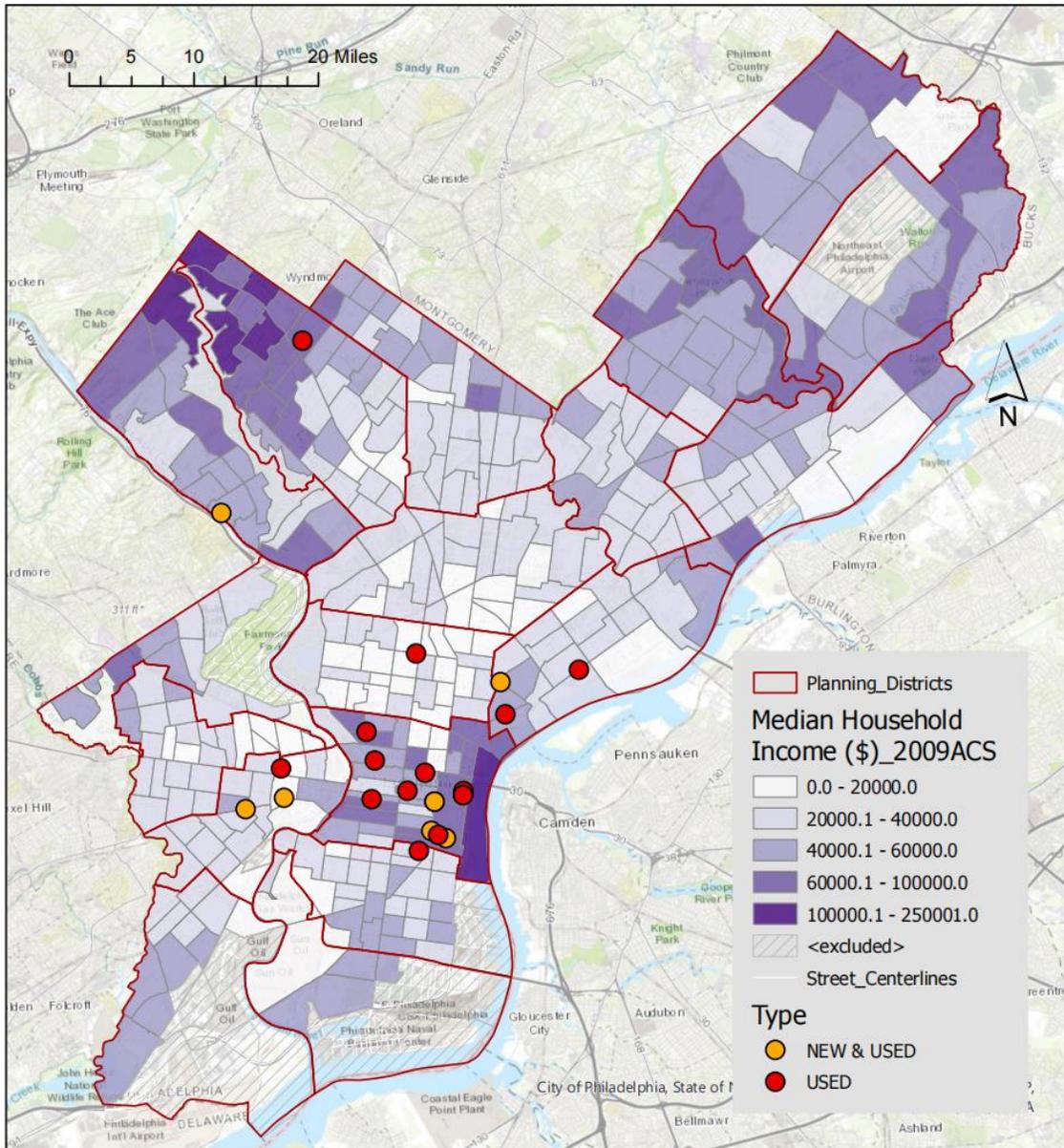
Source: Compiled by the author using *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and interviews with bookstore owners.

Appendix B-1: Map of Used Bookstores in 1990



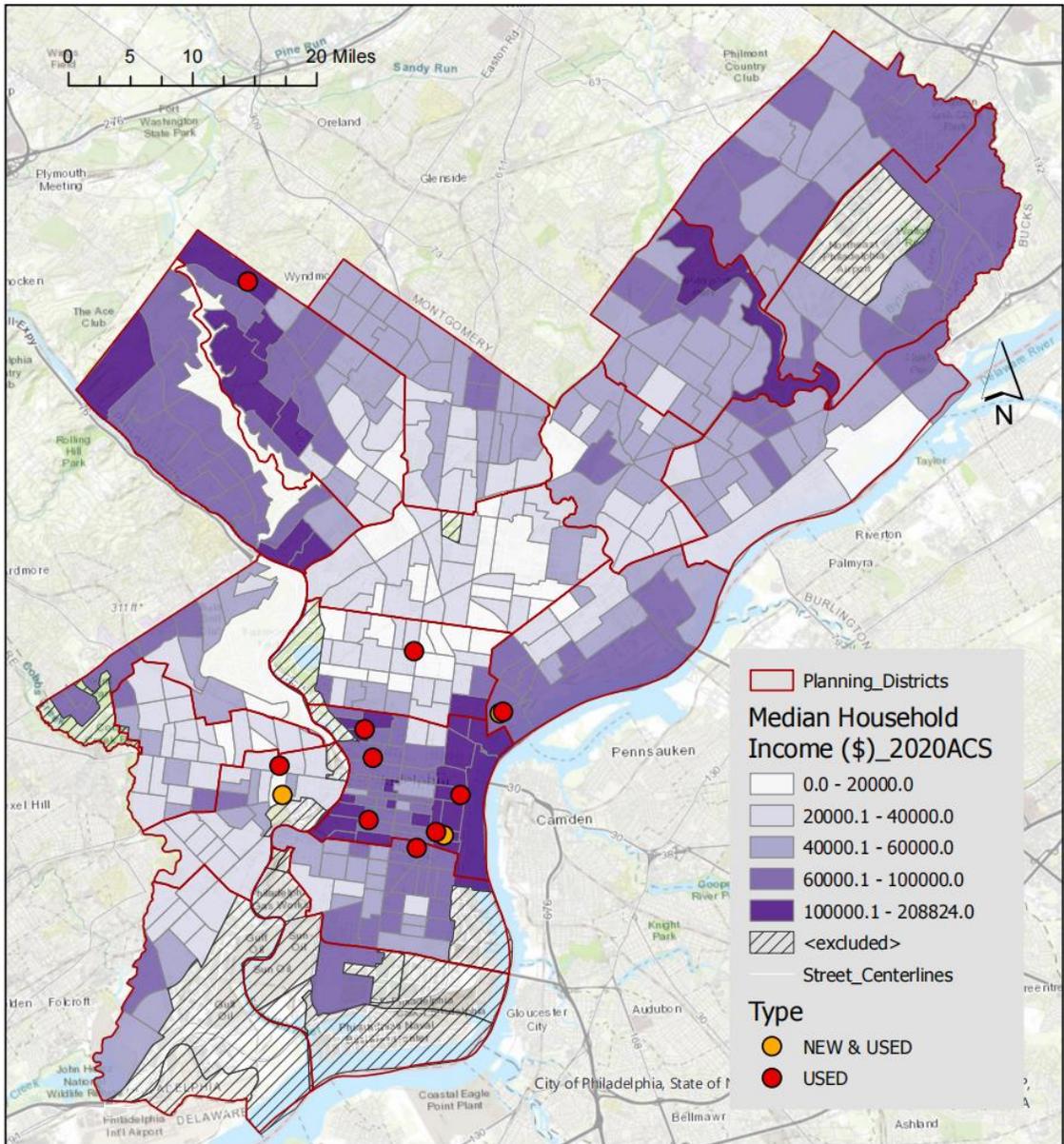
Source: Created by the author using the 1990 *Philadelphia Yellow Pages*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, interviews with bookstore owners, and planning district boundaries from OpenDataPhilly.

Appendix B-2: Map of Used Bookstores in 2010



Source: Created by the author using *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, interviews with bookstore owners, 2009 American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau, and planning district boundaries from OpenDataPhilly.

Appendix B-3: Map of Used Bookstores in 2025



Source: Created by the author using on-site surveys, bookstore websites, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, interviews with bookstore owners, 2020 American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau, and planning district boundaries from OpenDataPhilly.

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