

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Philadelphia Contributionship

AND/OR COMMON

Philadelphia Contributionship

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

212 South Fourth Street

\_\_NOT FOR PUBLICATION 3

CITY, TOWN

Philadelphia

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Pennsylvania

\_\_ VICINITY OF

CODE

42

COUNTY

Philadelphia

CODE

101

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

Contact: Walter L. Smith, Jr.  
Secretary & Treas.

NAME The Philadelphia Contributionship for  
the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire

STREET & NUMBER

212 South Fourth Street

CITY, TOWN

Philadelphia

\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

Pennsylvania

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Division of Records

STREET & NUMBER

Philadelphia City Hall

CITY, TOWN

Philadelphia

STATE

Pennsylvania

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE Historic American Buildings Survey; Pennsylvania Historical &  
Commission; National Register Museum

DATE

1959; 1969; 1971

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR

SURVEY RECORDS

Library of Congress; Pa. Hist. & Museum Comm.; NR

CITY, TOWN

Washington; Harrisburg; Washington

STATE

D.C.; Pa; D.C.

119

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

During its early years, the Philadelphia Contributionship had no permanent headquarters. The directors conducted the firm's general business during periodic meetings in various public buildings or taverns, policyholders met annually in the Philadelphia Courthouse, and the company clerk carried out routine day-to-day business from his home or office. After 1817 routine business was conducted in the countinghouse of company treasurer Joseph S. Lewis at 25 Dock Street. The directors discussed the acquisition of a permanent company office as early as 1816, but they did not act on this notion until 1835. In that year they bought property on South Fourth Street from Charles Poulson and engaged Thomas U. Walter, who was already on his way to becoming one of the Nation's leading architects in the Greek Revival style, to design a combination office and dwelling and supervise its construction. When completed, the building was to house the treasurer and his family as well as the business office. The elegant three-story, red brick structure that Walter produced in 1836 received a mansard roof and an additional story in 1866-67, but it has undergone no other major structural changes. It continues to serve as the Contributionship's headquarters on its original location, which is adjacent to Independence National Historic Site.

A number of lesser alterations have been made to the building. In 1866-67 the same architects who designed the mansard roof, Edward Collins and Charles Autenreith, supervised replacement of the deteriorating marble portico on the front facade and added curved railings and side steps to Walter's original design. In 1898, following the death of treasurer J. Somers Smith, the directors decided to convert the entire building into office space and retained the architectural firm of Furness, Evans, & Company to plan the changes and contractor John Duncan to execute them. In 1930 the company engaged architect Howard Lewis Shay to make additional internal changes, including installation of an electric elevator, and to remove the Collins and Autenreith scrolls from the base of the fourth-floor windows and the Furness, Evans, & Company cornices from the first-floor windows. Finally, in 1969 the Contributionship's directors had the first floor space renovated (by Hatfield, Martin, & White), and recently they had a black-painted steel fire escape attached to the rear portion of the north exterior wall.

As it stands today the 50-by-54-foot, three-bay-wide structure appears, except for its mansard roof, much the same as it did in 1836. It sits over a partially raised full basement, displays white-painted wood and marble trim and red brick bearing walls laid in Flemish bond, and has oak joists

(continued)

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# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES Subject: 1752-present BUILDER/ARCHITECT Dan. & Robt. Knight & Thomas  
 Site: 1835-present Thomas U. Walter Walter

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

As historian F. C. Oviatt pointed out to the American Academy of Political and Social Science more than 70 years ago, the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire was "the first fire insurance company to be organized in the United States."<sup>1</sup> Formed in 1752, largely as a result of exertions by Benjamin Franklin, it preceded the next oldest by 32 years. In addition it was, according to insurance historian John Bainbridge, "the first successful [mutual] insurance company" founded in this country.<sup>2</sup>

In its role as a pioneer institution the Philadelphia Contributionship established, says noted insurance executive Frederick T. Moses, two guidelines "that were to constitute the fundamentals of mutual insurance for two centuries thereafter. One was the careful selection of risks and the second was to inspect them."<sup>3</sup> The first of these Contributionship practices constituted, in Bainbridge's view, "the rude beginning of the science of rating risks." Besides these accomplishments, says Bainbridge, the firm originated the practice of setting rates according to the quality of the risk and "enunciated for the first time in America the great[est] principle of insurance-- accumulation of safety reserves."<sup>4</sup> Thus the Philadelphia Contributionship, despite having never issued insurance outside Philadelphia and its neighboring counties, has exerted a truly monumental influence upon the conduct of the insurance industry throughout the United States.

(continued)

<sup>1</sup>F.C. Oviatt, "History of Fire Insurance in the United States," in Lester W. Zartman and William H. Price (eds.), Property Insurance: Marine and Fire (New Haven, 1926. Published originally in 1909.), 72. Reprinted from Annals of the American Academy of Political Science, XXVI (September, 1905), 335-58.

<sup>2</sup>John Bainbridge, Biography of an Idea: The Story of Mutual Fire and Casualty Insurance (Garden City, 1952), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick T. Moses, Fireman of Industry (Providence, 1954), 10.

<sup>4</sup>Bainbridge, Biography of an Idea, 50, 54.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See continuation sheet.)

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY circa 1 acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	<u>18</u>	<u>48.73.00</u>	<u>442.16.40</u>	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary of the designated property coincides with the boundary of the legal lot known as 212 South Fourth Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

George R. Adams, Director, Historic Landmarks Project

ORGANIZATION

American Association for State and Local History May 1977

STREET & NUMBER

1400 Eighth Avenue South

TELEPHONE

615/242-5583

CITY OR TOWN

Nashville,

STATE

Tennessee 37203

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL     

STATE     

LOCAL     

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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with heart-pine flooring that is covered now with carpeting. Its marble front portico measures approximately 7 feet deep and 15 feet wide and consists of a base about 2 1/2 feet high and a flat roof with a Corinthian entablature supported by two plain rectangular pilasters and four fluted Corinthian columns. The columns are joined by a balustrade that extends across the front of the portico and curves, at each end, downward and outward along the matching side steps. In keeping with the portico, all windows have marble sills, lintels, and surrounds. On each side of the portico is a pair of twin windows with six-over-six sashes, recessed marble underpanels, pilastered mullions, and entablatures. Gracing the second-story front are three similar, but shorter, pairs with four-over-four sashes and no underpanels. Three still shorter four-over-four pairs, minus both pilastered mullions and underpanels, adorn the third-floor facade. Above them a heavy, dentiled cornice extends across the structure at the base of the mansard roof and concludes at each end in a heavy scroll bracket faced with a plaque bearing in relief the "four clasped hands" design, which is the company symbol that adorned early firemarks. On the fourth-floor level the mansard supports three pedimented dormers. The center one has a pair of four-over-four sashes, while those on each end feature a single window with six-over-six sashes.

Fenestration on the sides of the Contributionship headquarters is irregular. The south side has two single windows on the first floor and a third in the secondary stair well between the second and third stories. The north side has three single windows on the first floor, a pair on the second, and accesses throughout to the recently installed fire escape. The rear facade, like the front, is symmetrical in design. A center entrance door and single center-placed stair-well windows on the second and third stories form a middle bay, to each side of which on each floor is a pair of single windows with white-painted plain or louvered shutters that match those on the stair-well openings. The first-floor and stair-well windows have six-over-six sashes; the others have four-over-four. Above, the mansard supports three pedimented dormers. The center one contains a louvered air vent, while the end two have four-over-four sashes. At ground level the entrance door is single with nine glass lights above two wood panels. It is flanked by sidelights and set under an entablature with plain freize. At one time a one-story porch with north

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conservatory extended partly across the first story of the rear facade, but it has been removed. A pair of red brick, multiflue, interior end chimneys rise from both the north and south walls and complete the exterior detail. The building is situated close to the curb and has a large rear courtyard with narrow side corridors that extend past each side of the structure to South Fourth Street's brick sidewalk. Surrounding the courtyard is a high brick and cast-iron fence.

Walter designed the building with a central hall and a double front door. One opening led into the treasurer's residence on the north side of the structure, while the other led into the business office on the south side. Today a wood double door, flanked by sidelights and topped by a transom, admits to a small vestibule from which two more wood double doors lead into what formerly was the first floor hall. The partitions between that hall and the two front rooms have been removed, however, to create a combination reception and office area covering the entire front half of the building. White-painted woodwork and plasterwork characterize the area, and the furnishings and general decor are indicative of the good taste that is shown throughout the structure. Ornamentation includes egg-and-dart cornice molding, paneled wainscoting underneath the windows, and Ionic pilaster-supported entablatures above the openings. The room also contains exhibits of documents and artifacts pertaining to company history.

Rear of the reception room and in the northwest corner of the first floor is the office of the company treasurer. It features green-painted plaster walls and a white marble mantle. Opposite it in the southwest corner is the assistant treasurer's office with blue-painted plaster walls and a black marble mantle. Between these two offices is the remaining portion of the original central hall, where along the south wall a single-flight, open-string, balustraded stair rises to the second and third floors. Other access to these stories is by the 1930-vintage electric elevator, which is situated in a shaft near the center of the south exterior wall. A small stair in the center of the south half of the building connects the third and fourth floors.

On the second floor the left front chamber houses the board room, which features a black marble mantle and several original 1836 bird's-eye maple company chairs. Rear of it is the directors' dining room with similar mantle, sideboard with carved clasped hands, and other antique pieces. Across the (cont.)

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hall is the finance committee's room, which extends the full length of the north side and fills space occupied formerly by two of the treasurer's bedrooms. Above it on the third floor is another double room housing the accounting department, and across from this room are a modern kitchen and women's lounge, both recently installed in place of offices. The fourth floor contains along its north side still another double office and on its south side a secondary conference room and the chairman's office. On each upper floor the south end of the former central hall has been converted to either a workroom, coat closet, or restroom.

Below, the basement formerly housed a furnace room, two coal bins, two kitchens, and a vault. Today the furnace room serves essentially the same purpose, the coal bins are used for general storage, and the kitchens are used chiefly for archives and records storage, as is the original vault room.

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During its early years the Philadelphia Contributionship had no permanent headquarters. Its directors conducted general company business during periodic meetings in various public buildings and taverns, and the firm's clerk carried out routine matters in his own home or office. In 1836, however, the Contributionship moved into this newly constructed 3 1/2-story red brick house, and it has served as company headquarters ever since. Over the years it has undergone both external and internal alterations, but the only significant structural change has been the addition, in 1866-67, of the present mansard roof. The building holds many historic company artifacts and antique furnishings, is rich in tradition, and remains in excellent condition.

History

Fire insurance originated in England early in the 18th century and was soon imported to the American colonies. The Friendly Society for the Mutual Insuring of Houses against Fire began offering fire insurance in Charleston in 1735, but the disastrous Charleston conflagration of 1740 drove them out of business. It was largely at the direction of Benjamin Franklin, says Bainbridge, that America's "first successful fire insurance company" was established in Philadelphia in 1752.<sup>5</sup> Twenty years earlier, following a major fire in that city, Franklin had formed a pioneer volunteer fire-fighting unit, the Union Fire Company, and over the years he had continued his interest in fire prevention. In 1750 he used the Union Company as the basis for his first experiment with fire insurance. Each member of the company was asked to contribute to a fund to be used to repair any fire damage that their property might suffer. After about a year Franklin and his associates, who included future city treasurer Philip Syng, decided that the benefits of their plan should be extended to other citizens, and so they discussed their idea with Philadelphia's six other volunteer fire companies and got an enthusiastic response. Representatives of the companies met periodically over the next few months to plan the new enterprise. The organization that they formed, the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, publicly solicited its first

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 41.



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subscribers on February 18, 1752. A few weeks later, on April 13, these met at the Philadelphia Courthouse, elected Quaker merchant John Smith as treasurer, and selected twelve directors, among whom were Franklin, alderman John Mifflin, assemblyman Joseph Fox, ironmaker and assemblyman Hugh Roberts, and political leader Israel Pemberton, Jr.

During the next few years the directors met frequently at the courthouse or in local taverns to formulate the Contributionship's policies and conduct its general business. To handle routine matters they hired a clerk, Joseph Saunders, whose home near the Delaware River became the company's general office. The deed of settlement, which all the initial subscribers signed, limited insurance to an area within 10 miles of Philadelphia and within Pennsylvania, specified a 7-year term of coverage to be granted in consideration of a single deposit returnable at expiration of the term, and set a schedule of rates applicable to various kinds of buildings. Almost immediately the directors limited acceptable risks to houses built according to legal specifications and refused to insure any house not approved by one of the company's two inspectors, or "surveyors," Joseph Fox and Samuel Rhoads, both of whom were master builders.

In setting forth these policies the Contributionship established two guidelines that, according to Moses, "were to constitute the fundamentals of mutual insurance for two centuries thereafter. One was the careful selection of risks and the second was to inspect them."<sup>6</sup> In fact, says Bainbridge, the Contributionship's system of inspection "was the rude beginning of the science of rating risks." Bainbridge also credits the Contributionship with "originating the practice of setting the rate, or cost, of insurance in accordance with the quality of the risk."<sup>7</sup> English fire insurance companies operated with only two rates, one for brick structures and one for frame structures. These were applied to all edifices in their respective classes without regard to differences. In contrast the Contributionship directors considered surveyors' reports on such variables as whether a kitchen was attached and whether combustibles were stored on the premises and then adjusted the rates accordingly.

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<sup>6</sup>Moses, Firemen of Industry, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Bainbridge, Biography of an Idea, 50.

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In addition to adopting these innovative practices, the Contributionship "enunciated for the first time in America," says Bainbridge, "the great[est] principle of insurance-- accumulation of safety reserves."<sup>8</sup> During its first 10 years the company progressed, but only at a slow pace, and while its number of policies increased from 143 to 801 between the beginning of its 2d year and the end of its 10th, both insurance in force and deposits declined. Part of the difficulty stemmed from lack of reserves. Accordingly, in 1763 the policyholders voted to have deposits placed thereafter in one account and interest on them in another, with the latter being used for claims and the former remaining untouched unless interest was exhausted. Thus the company soon accumulated a effective reserve.

Due in large part to this reserve policy, but also because of prosperous times and a good fire record, the 1760's witnessed a turning point in the Contributionship's fortunes, and it entered a period of steady growth. To make certain that this continued, in 1769 the company decided to cease insuring wooden buildings and brick buildings with wooden gables. A few years later, in 1781, it declined to issue further policies to houses with trees around them. Since fire engines of the time lacked hoses, it was thought that trees too often blocked the stream of water pumped from the engine and therefore interfered with the ability of firemen to extinguish blazes. A few policyholders objected to this reasoning and the company's resulting decision, and when the majority voted it into the Contributionship's by-laws in 1784, the dissenters withdrew and formed the Mutual Assurance Company for Insuring Houses from Loss by Fire. This firm's willingness to insure tree-surrounded dwellings was illustrated in its firemark, a plaque that every fire insurance company developed to be mounted on the front of its insured houses. Probably it surprised no one when the Mutual selected a mark depicting a tree. The Mutual was only the second fire insurance company formed in America, and in 1801 it became the first to write perpetual insurance. The Contributionship adopted this innovation only 9 years later, however.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 54.



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The Philadelphia Contributionship's business slackened during the War of 1812 but soon picked up again, and the reelection of Horace Binney to the board of directors in 1831-- he had served previously in 1817-20--marked, according to company historian Nicholas B. Wainwright, the Contributionship's emergence as a modern corporation. "No Director since the founders," says Wainwright, "has played a more significant role in the Company's history."<sup>9</sup> Binney modernized its book-keeping system, moved annual meetings from the courthouse to the company's own offices, abolished the prohibition against insuring houses surrounded by trees, and waived the 10-mile limit on granting policies. He also convinced the directors of the need to acquire a permanent office and give the treasurer greater responsibility for managing day-to-day company affairs, and he headed the committee that recommended construction of the present company headquarters in 1835. The Contributionship began writing increased industrial risks in the 1840's, and in 1852 it closed its first century with almost \$8 million in insurance in force and almost \$700,000 in assets.

The firm's second century has not been characterized by innovation, as was the first, but on the whole it has been a time of progress and growth. After the Civil War, while other fire insurance companies grew rapidly, the Contributionship, always conservative in its governing policies and never aggressive in the pursuit of new business, cancelled extrahazardous risks, concentrated on preferred ones, and experienced a much slower expansion than its competitors. Around the turn of the century, though, the company adopted the new business practices of the time, and until the Great Depression of the 1930's it pursued more liberal underwriting standards. It continues to be a relatively small firm, but a prosperous one, and in recent decades it has broadened its coverage to include liability for smoke damage and loss from wind, hail, explosion, riot, vehicles, and aircraft. In 1952, its bicentennial year, the Contributionship had \$77 million in insurance in force and \$14 million in assets. Today its assets total almost \$50 million.

<sup>9</sup>Nicholas B. Wainwright, The Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire (Philadelphia, 1952), 97.

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