Discovering Chestnut Hill: Learn about Fairmount Park History in a spectacular home at the Park’s edge

by Lori Salganicoff, Executive Director, Chestnut Hill Conservancy

The Thursday, Nov. 15 final event in the Chestnut Hill Conservancy’s Fall 2018 “Discovering Chestnut Hill” tour and lecture series will present a history of Fairmount Park in Homewood, the spectacular Chestnut Hill home of Kim and Iain Dukes (former home of Eleanor Widener Dixon). Limited tickets remain for this unique illustrated lecture, presented by Lucy Strackhouse of the Fairmount Park Conservancy.

Fairmount Park Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that evolved out of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park Commission – created in 1998 to attract private investments in the city’s park system and architectural resources. The commission was a city agency founded in 1867 to purchase land for Fairmount Park around the Schuylkill River in order to protect the City’s water supply and provide the residents of Philadelphia with a place for outdoor activities. This was in keeping with William Penn’s original vision for Philadelphia as a “green country town.”

By the late 1990s, under the leadership of Fitz Eugene Dixon Jr., the commission had come to manage more than 8,000 acres of public parkland, including neighborhood and watershed parks in addition to Fairmount Park itself.

The original domain of Fairmount Park consisted of three areas: “South Park” or the South Garden immediately below the Fairmount Water Works extending to the Callowhill Street Bridge; “Old Park,” which encompassed the former estates of Lemon Hill and Sedgeley; and West Park, the area including the Philadelphia Zoo and the Centennial Exposition grounds. The South Garden predated the establishment of the Park Commission in 1867, while Lemon Hill and Sedgeley were added in 1855–56. After the Civil War, work progressed on acquiring and laying out West Park. In the 1870s, the Fairmount Park Commission expropriated properties along the Wissahickon Creek to extend Fairmount Park.
Fairmount Park, Philadelphia's first park, now consists of approximately 11,000 acres comprised of two park sections named East Park and West Park, divided by the Schuylkill River.

Fitz Dixon served as president of the prestigious Fairmount Park Commission from 1983-2002. The commission administered the city's public park system from 1867 to 2010, with powers to supervise park improvements, write and enforce regulations, hire park staff and even maintained its own police force until 1972.

As a result of its considerable authority, appointment to the commission was highly desirable. Multiple generations of the Price and Widener families served on the Commission, including industrialist P.A.B. Widener and his greatgrandson Fitz Eugene Dixon Jr.

In addition to Fairmount Park, Dixon was deeply involved with many beloved Philadelphia institutions, owning the Eagles, Phillies, Flyers and 76ers (bringing Dr. J to that team shortly after purchasing it). He served as chair of the Philadelphia Art Commission, the Delaware River Port Authority and on the boards of several universities. Dixon also purchased and donated the “LOVE” sculpture, lent to the city for the nation's bicentennial but remaining here through Dixon's philanthropy. The recent renovation of that sculpture and LOVE Park were made possible by a grant from his wife, Edie Dixon.

Homewood, at 9002 Crefeld St., was built in 1929-30 by the firm Tilden, Register & Pepper. The Norman-style country house is situated on five acres adjoining Wissahickon Park. After Eleanor Widener Dixon purchased the estate in 1949, the office of Horace Trumbauer designed a number of extensive changes including the installation of Tudor-period wood paneling from Dixon's Elkins Park estate, reported to have been salvaged from a hunting lodge of King James II.

The external and landscaping design was carried out by noted Long Island firm of Innocenti & Webel. The renovation work of current and recent owners has begun the restoration of the home to this era, with appropriate modern upgrades.

This lecture – in this home – are not to be missed. Visit chconservancy.org (http://chconservancy.org) to purchase tickets and to learn more about this special event Thursday, Nov. 15 at 6 p.m.

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