

## Discovering Chestnut Hill: The Italian artisans who built Chestnut Hill

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([http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Column\\_CHC.jpg](http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Column_CHC.jpg))

*The Morasco family in 1925, dressed in their Easter Sunday best. The Morascos lived at 8143 Shawnee Street in the 1920s, with the edge of their front porch visible at the far left. (Photo courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy)*

### by David Contosta for the Chestnut Hill Conservancy

On Saturday, May 5th, from 1 to 2 p.m., the Chestnut Hill Conservancy will sponsor the second in a series of three guided walking tours. This one will highlight the work of Italian artisans in the southwest quadrant of the community.

The tour will gather at Seminole and West Willow Grove Avenues and begin with an exploration of several properties developed by George and Gertrude Woodward, most of them constructed of the local stone, known as Wissahickon schist. A consistent oral tradition holds that Italian masons accomplished virtually all the stone work on the Woodward properties, including the Lorenzon Brothers and Marcolina Brothers.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, the Woodwards commissioned nearly 200 housing units in Chestnut Hill and vicinity. They were known for building their units in courts and clusters, which provided shared open space for residents. In Southwest Chestnut Hill,

these include the Cotswold Court, Roanoke Court, and the Half Moon group, all designed in a vernacular English style. Similar in style is the Woodward's Cotswold Village.

In addition to these sites, the tour will pause at "Sulgrave Manor," a replica of the home of George Washington's English ancestors that still stands in South Northamptonshire. The replica was built for the 1926 Sesquicentennial World's Fair in Philadelphia, and afterward was reassembled in Chestnut Hill by the Woodward's.

The tour will continue along Roanoke Street, starting with the Roanoke Garage, originally designed and built by Antonio Roman, himself one of the early Italian artisans in Chestnut Hill, as the location of his construction company. Along Roanoke Street, members of the Roman, Lorenzon, and Filippi families designed or built several houses for themselves in what was essentially an Italian neighborhood.

This neighborhood once extended further up and along the west side of Roanoke Street as far as Hartwell Lane. The initial residents on the 8100 block were Luigi Serianni and Joe Paul (probably an anglicized version of his name), who settled there in the late 1880s.

The City of Philadelphia took these properties through eminent domain and demolished them in 1915 to make way for the east side of Pastorius Park. Serianni went to court to fight the seizure and subsequent demolitions of his own and adjacent properties, where he and many of his neighbors had lived for years—but to no avail. The locations of these demolished properties are still visible from depressions in the earth at the edge of the park. They also appear on a Philadelphia City Atlas from 1911, an image from which will be shared during the tour.

Parking will be available in the lot at the St. Martin's Station or along the street. The tour guides will be Fran Manero and David Contosta.

A third and final walking tour will take place on June 9 and will cover various parts of Southeast Chestnut Hill that are associated with Italian artisans. The cost for each tour is \$10 for Conservancy members and \$20 for the public. Register online at [chconservancy.org/walking-tours](http://chconservancy.org/walking-tours) (<http://chconservancy.org/walking-tours>) or by calling 215-247-9329.

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