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## Discovering Chestnut Hill: The changing landscape of the Chestnut Hill West line

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**by Alex Bartlett**

Last spring, the Chestnut Hill Conservancy held its first of two programs on the history of railroads in Chestnut Hill. The focus of the spring program was the history of SEPTA's Chestnut Hill East line and consisted of a walking tour, highlighting the history and architecture of buildings and landscapes along the former Reading Railroad line. On Saturday, Nov. 9, the second program will be held, featuring the history of the Chestnut Hill West line.

The Chestnut Hill West line – formerly the Pennsylvania Railroad's line to Chestnut Hill – was opened in 1884. Pennsylvania Railroad executive Henry Howard Houston purchased land

along the proposed right-of-way of this new line and developed his planned community of Wissahickon Heights centered around a station by the same name. The station was ultimately renamed St. Martins in the early 1900s. Like the Chestnut Hill East line, the West line was built through largely undeveloped land, and the arrival of the railroad spurred residential development along the tracks, with short sidings built near many stations to handle local freight.

By the arrival of World War I, much of the west side of Chestnut Hill had become densely settled, and the Pennsylvania Railroad embarked on a plan to eliminate grade crossings along the Chestnut Hill West line and electrify it. This project would eliminate conflicts between automobile and railroad traffic, and would allow for more frequent service on the West line. The project was a massive undertaking and, after being delayed by the start of the war, was completed in 1918. Railroad crossings eliminated during the project included those of Highland and Seminole Avenues.

This photograph of the original Highland station was taken around 1900. The view is toward Chestnut Hill West, with Highland Avenue in the immediate foreground. The house to the right is 309 W. Highland Ave. To remove the grade crossing, the original station was demolished and a small frame waiting shed was constructed to the south side of Highland Avenue on the inbound side. The railroad cut was excavated deeper, and the surrounding area was raised to provide enough vertical space for a bridge to span the railroad tracks. The waiting shed stood until the late 1980s when it was destroyed by fire. It stood where the present shelter is located today. The 1918 bridge was replaced in 1988 by the current bridge spanning the tracks. Despite these changes, the station has the same overall “feel” that it had 100 years ago.

Other examples of these changes can be found along both railroad lines throughout Chestnut Hill. Would you like to learn more? The Chestnut Hill Conservancy is continuing its year-long program series called “Railroads of Chestnut Hill” this fall. Topics will include, but are not limited to, the history and preservation of our railroad stations, the history of the railroads themselves and their rights of way. Join us on Oct. 23 for an illustrated lecture by Ted Xaras on the history of Chestnut Hill’s two railroad lines and how they shaped the communities they serve. On Nov. 9, we will hold a driving tour to explore the stations on the Chestnut Hill West line. Visit the Conservancy’s website (<http://CHConservancy.org/Discovering-Chestnut-Hill>) or email [info@chconservancy.org](mailto:info@chconservancy.org) for more information and to buy tickets.

*Alex Bartlett is the archivist at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.*

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