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A phoenix rising: a history of the Chestnut Hill Fire House

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The Chestnut Hill Fire House (right) and Police Station, circa 1917. The Police Station was torn down in 1959. (Courtesy of the Archives at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy)

by George McNeely

The current careful restoration of our firehouse on Highland Avenue leads this writer to wonder how the sleepy village of Chestnut Hill ended up with such a grand and imposing building?

The firehouse was constructed in 1884 to the designs of John Torrey Windram (1886-1934), the prolific Philadelphia architect. Its style has been dubbed "Richardsonian Romanesque" in honor of one of the greatest American architects of the 19th Century: Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886).

Between the Civil War and the First World War, the expanding and boisterous United States required new and ever larger buildings of all types. Architects responded by creating structures in a smorgasbord of styles that incorporated historical references into confident new designs that responded to ever more complicated functional requirements. Some of those buildings may not seem attractive to contemporary eyes, but they are wonderful testaments to the Gilded Age.

H.H. Richardson drew on the vocabulary of early Christian, Byzantine and Romanesque churches in Europe to produce buildings that conveyed strength and authority. Among his greatest buildings is the astonishing Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh, a vast irregular glacier of reddish granite that is an essential visit when in that city.

For our firehouse, Windram chose Richardson's style with large roughly cut blocks of stone that gradually diminish in size as the building rises, two massive arched doors topped by huge blocks of contrasting smooth limestone, a range of other windows, gables, dormers, and the tall vertical accent of the chimney.

The imposing Romanesque pile is also linked to its particular location by the choice of our native Wissahickon schist and the unexpected diaper pattern in the central gable, with its varying colored and textured stones. It simultaneously references both the Arts & Crafts movement colored glass tiles of that period and also the glazed header bricks found in our earlier regional Colonial architecture.

When originally built, the firehouse was complemented by an adjacent police substation designed by the same architect in the same style. Together, they offered an imposing testament to governmental authority. (Sadly the police substation was demolished in 1959.)

Fire fighters have had a complicated history in this country.

Back in 1683, when William Penn dictated the grid street pattern for his new city of Philadelphia and encouraged open space between houses, he was remembering the crowded London that was devastated by the Great Fire of 1666. Our city's first fire prevention laws were passed in 1685, but it was not until 1736 that the tireless Benjamin Franklin founded the first volunteer fire company. The nearby German township, including Chestnut Hill, founded its own volunteer fire companies in 1764.

Throughout the following century, fire companies were volunteer fraternal organizations, similar to masonic lodges. In most locations it was considered an honor to serve as a fireman, and applicants were carefully vetted. Firehouses were important social centers in each town or neighborhood, and sometimes played the role later played by political parties in influencing public sentiment.

Such organizations were also competitive and occasionally violent, sometimes giving fire fighters a bad reputation.

The 1854 Act of Consolidation greatly expanded the borders of Philadelphia and incorporated Chestnut Hill. The larger city established a centrally organized municipal fire department in 1871.

At that time, our local voluntary fire company was known as the Congress Company and operated out of a modest wooden structure on Germantown Avenue near Evergreen. With the establishment of the city fire department, the Congress Company ceased to operate but remained as a social organization for another decade. For a time, local residents had to rely on the firehouse three miles away in Germantown.

But not for long. The decade of the 1880's brought significant changes to Chestnut Hill. The train line now known as Chestnut Hill West was opened, along with the Wissahickon Inn (now SCH School), the Philadelphia Cricket Club, and a significant number of new houses. It also saw the establishment of our local municipal fire station in 1886.

All across Philadelphia (and the country), the Progressive Era brought fervent growth in municipal services, including an expanded police department, more parks and recreational facilities, bridges, sewer lines, and schools. That tide then eventually brought the construction of our own new firehouse in 1894.

That period of municipal expansion and reform often took its stylistic cues from the buildings of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, which commemorated the 400th anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus. For its layout and buildings, designers looked to European Beaux Arts and Neoclassical precedents and created what became known as "The White City."

For the Chestnut Hill fire station, the young architect John T. Windrim produced one of his last buildings in the Romanesque Revival style before turning enthusiastically to embrace that Neoclassicism. He went on to create many notable local buildings in that style, including the Franklin Institute and the Family Court Building just across Logan Circle.

Our firehouse is reportedly now the oldest such building in the City. As we observe its restoration and expansion, perhaps we should consider an event to celebrate its completion that honors both the grandeur of that building and the importance of our fire fighters to Chestnut Hill today?

I would like to acknowledge the Chestnut Hill Conservancy. Without their archives and helpful staff, writing this article would have been much harder.

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