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Discovering Chestnut Hill: Firehouse tells half the story

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The police station (left) and fire station are shown standing side by side on West Highland Avenue shortly after the turn of the 20th century, each telling half of a story about the history of Chestnut Hill. (Photo courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy)

**by Alex Bartlett, Archivist,
Chestnut Hill Conservancy**

Much of the history of Chestnut Hill may seem to be fairly obvious and self-explanatory to some. The presence of our beautiful old buildings up and down Germantown Avenue and the stately homes situated on leafy lanes interspersed with open spaces bear testimony to times past and to those who lived and worked here before us. However, what one might see today is only half of the story. It is the story of only that which has been left standing. So much of our history is now hidden from plain sight, but with a review of historical documents and photographs, this history readily returns to light.

Such is the case with the Chestnut Hill police station. It once stood right alongside the fire station, located at 101 West Highland Avenue, on the corner of Shawnee Street. Shown in this early 20th-century photograph on the front of a postcard, the police station stood to the left, in the area which had been an open lawn for decades, until the construction of the new fire station recently began.

In 1894, the police and fire stations were built together for the City of Philadelphia. Architect John T. Windrim designed the buildings. But what happened to the police station? In the 1950s, the police stations of the 14th Police District were consolidated and were relocated to a newly constructed building on West Haines Street, behind Germantown's Town Hall. This relocation made the old police station in Chestnut Hill redundant. It entered a period of dormancy and began to slowly decay. The old police station was finally demolished in 1959. Not a trace of the old police station remained after the demolition was complete, and the open lawn that grew in its stead gave no hints as to what once stood there.

These two buildings were built together and worked in tandem, much like a salt and pepper shaker. Each gained meaning from the other. The fire station only tells half the story; the other half — that of the old police station — is told by photographs like the one shown here.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Archives and Library of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy are closed. However, we have started a new page on the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's website, called "History at Home." If you have a case of "cabin fever," the content is sure to entertain you. Visit the new content at <http://chconservancy.org/history-at-home> (about:blank). In the meantime, we will continue to monitor our email remotely. Please direct questions to the Archives and Library to Archivist Alex Bartlett at alex@chconservancy.org (about:blank). Direct all other inquiries to info@chconservancy.org (about:blank).

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