



Chestnut Hill Local

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Monday, March 8, 2021

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Discovering Chestnut Hill: The Wissahickon Garden Club



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Wearing their finest "vegetable hats" at the home of Mrs. Ann Steele, of "Sugarloaf" (now Chestnut Hill College's Sugarloaf Hill campus) in December 1939 are Wissahickon Garden Club members including Mmes. Butterworth, Gribbel, Lovering, Paul, Whitney, Johnson and Chase. Photo courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.

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By Alex Bartlett, Archivist, Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Normally, the first week of March brings us a reminder that spring is just around the corner, with the arrival of the Philadelphia Flower Show. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society has scheduled the event for early June at the FDR Park in South Philadelphia. Regardless, the arrival of March is an ideal time to consider a local organization that has contributed entries to many Philadelphia Flower shows over the generations: The Wissahickon Garden Club.

Founded in 1932 during the depths of the Great Depression, the Wissahickon Garden Club (WGC) was begun by six local women, including Louisa Whitney, Hope Randolph and Dorothy Lammot, who owned houses adjacent to the Wissahickon Valley. Each had been concerned with the proposed opening of what we now know as Forbidden Drive to

automobiles, and this threat helped to stir something within them. They fought not only against the arrival of the automobile in the Wissahickon, but worked towards the preservation of the park itself. And from this, the WGC was born.

In its first year, two members had entries in the Philadelphia Flower Show and enjoyed moderate success, with both entries winning awards. More important, the WGC's presence and success in the Flower Show exposed the organization to the public, which became aware of its work and accomplishments.

As the decade of the 1930s wore on, the Club began to provide arrangements for various organizations, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and members became involved in civic projects, including the planting of the of Christ Church cemetery, in Center City. This, in turn, provided even more exposure to the WGC, and to the quality of their work.

During World War II, the Club opened victory gardens, with much of the harvest being donated to the Chestnut Hill Hospital. The organization's hard work was not unnoticed, and in 1942, the WGC was made a member of the Garden Club of America.

In the early 1950s, the members of the WGC fought another threat to Philadelphia's parks: the arrival of the Schuylkill Expressway. Specifically, the organization fought to ban the installation of billboards along the Expressway's right-of-way through Fairmount Park, and to assist with plantings along its right of way, once completed. Their hard work paid off: In 1958, Congress approved a \$5.5 billion highway bill restricting the installation of billboards along our highways, including the Schuylkill Expressway.

Since then, the WGC has continued its tradition of enhancing green spaces within Philadelphia and locally such as: Discovery Center entrance way, Mann Music Center entrance, the Concord School, Wissahickon Trails' stepping stones, several projects with the Friends of Wissahickon, the Conservancy's own native plant garden, and most recently, significant contributions to the Chestnut Hill Garden District Fund and the Friends of Pastorius Park. In addition to the Club's civic and conservation work, the Club has won many ribbons at the Philadelphia Flower Show over the years in floral design, horticulture, design and botanical arts classes.

The WGC recently donated its photographic albums to the Chestnut Hill Conservancy. This donation consisted of 27 albums of photographs, newspaper clippings, programs and ephemera, documenting the rich history of the organization. To help catalog and

digitize this collection, the members of the WGC have made a financial donation to the Conservancy, reflecting its confidence in the organization's professional management of its archives and as a tribute to the high level of standards to which the collection will be processed.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Archives and Library of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy are closed. However, if you would like to donate any items documenting the history of Chestnut Hill, please let us know about them! Please get in touch with Conservancy Archivist Alex Bartlett to let him know about anything you might like to donate to our collections BEFORE sending it along or dropping it off, by emailing him at Alex@chconservancy.org (about:blank). He will get back to you as soon as he can. Direct all other inquiries to info@chconservancy.org (about:blank).

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