



Chestnut Hill Local

(/)
Saturday, March 30, 2024

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On the rails: Our local trains



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An early 1980s view of the original 1884 trestle spanning the Cresheim Valley. SEPTA cited the poor condition of the trestle as a reason to eliminate the Chestnut Hill West line in the 1980s until funding came through, and the trestle was replaced in 1989 with the steel and concrete bridge that exists today.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE CHESTNUT HILL CONSERVANCY

Posted Wednesday, February 21, 2024 12:00 am

by Alex Bartlett

If the current threat to the Chestnut Hill West regional rail line turns out to be the death knell that residents and businesses fear, it would mean much more than just the end of the local transit service. It would also write a final chapter in a pivotal part of Chestnut Hill history.

The Chestnut Hill West and the Chestnut Hill East rail lines, reaching Chestnut Hill in 1884 and 1854, respectively, were a force that forever changed the landscape of Philadelphia's Northwest neighborhoods. With the addition of the two train lines, the neighborhoods that had been relatively rural villages were transformed into city commuter suburbs.

The changes began in 1832, when the Philadelphia, Germantown and Norristown (P.G. and N) Railroad built a line to Germantown to serve that bustling community and the mills that existed there, many of which stood along Wingohocking Creek, now, in part under present-day Belfield Avenue. The terminus of this railroad was at the corner of Germantown Avenue and Price Street and stood until the early 1980s when it was destroyed by fire.

In 1854, the railroad extended the line to Chestnut Hill, with its endpoint located where it is today, at the corner of Bethlehem Pike and East Chestnut Hill Avenue. As a result of that convenient connection into what we now call Center City, those residents came here to build large, single homes along Summit Street and Prospect Avenue – many of which were built in the Italianate style for Philadelphia executives.

Thirty years later, the Pennsylvania Railroad would build a branch of its railroad to Chestnut Hill – at the insistence of Railroad executive Henry Howard Houston.

Houston – a founding father of Chestnut Hill – proposed that this new line would serve his planned community of Wissahickon Heights (renamed St. Martin's in the early 1900s), which was to be centered around a cricket club (the Philadelphia Cricket Club), a church (St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church), and a hotel (the Wissahickon Inn, now part of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy's campus).

Adjacent to these amenities, Houston planned to build a series of rental homes designed for upper-middle-class professionals and upper-class executives who would use his railroad to travel to and from work in Center City.

Houston's plans were realized, and a flourishing suburb was constructed starting in the mid-1880s. Houston died in 1895, and his son-in-law, George Woodward, continued his legacy of building rental homes for a similar clientele.



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Both railroads and their respective lines flourished until the 1950s. At that time, the arrival of the interstate system made the car more attractive as a way to commute to and from Center City, and those who could afford to do so often moved to newly built suburbs in locations like King of Prussia and Levittown, Pennsylvania. Businesses and industries followed them, which left even fewer people to use the railroad as a means of transport, including the lines to Chestnut Hill.

By the 1980s, ridership levels on both lines to Chestnut Hill had been steadily dropping for 20 years, and state funding had decreased. The Chestnut Hill East and West lines had two of the lowest ridership levels in what had recently become SEPTA’s Regional Rail division.

SEPTA threatened to end service on the Chestnut Hill West line, rather than the East, citing low ridership levels, the line’s use of AMTRAK property, and the poor condition of the line’s iron trestle spanning the Cresheim Valley, which was original to the line and 100 years old. A 1989 replacement of the trestle, along with updating the overhead wires and a resurfacing of the line helped make the Chestnut Hill West less susceptible to proposed service cuts or elimination.

Since then, in an almost cyclical fashion, SEPTA has proposed eliminating the line about once every ten years, citing budget shortfalls and ridership levels.

In January, Governor Josh Shapiro announced plans to incorporate an extra \$282.8 million in public funding for public transit in Pennsylvania, about \$185 million of which is slated for SEPTA. That’s just short of the \$190 million SEPTA CEO Leslie Richards said the transit agency needed to avoid a death spiral of service cuts and fare increases.

And this time, residents who are organizing the grassroots effort “Save the Train” have reason to believe that could be it. SEPTA hasn’t officially proposed cutting either the Chestnut Hill West or the Chestnut Hill East lines, but the agency’s \$240 million budget shortfall looms and federal pandemic funding is set to run out at the end of June. So the train coalition continues to rally in support of that line and for help in getting Shapiro’s funding plan passed by the Pennsylvania state legislature,

So far, that effort has included rallies at stations along the line, including Richard Allen Lane station and Tulpehocken station. A third rally is scheduled for Feb. 24 at Cheltenham station at 9:30 a.m.

On Thursday, Congressman Dwight Evans announced that SEPTA would be the recipient of a \$317 million federal grant to buy 200 new rail cars for the Market-Frankford Line.

To learn more about the history of the railroads in Northwest Philadelphia and the surrounding area, go to chconservancy.org/archives (<http://chconservancy.org/archives>).

Alex Bartlett is the Chestnut Hill Conservancy archivist.

Chestnut Hill Local reporter Tom Beck contributed to this report.

OTHER ITEMS THAT MAY INTEREST YOU

A bright new future for OMC (/stories/a-bright-new-future-for-omc,31627)

Seeking a solution to sewer floods (/stories/seeking-a-solution-to-sewer-floods,31628)

Hosting dinners that build bridges (/stories/hosting-dinners-that-build-bridges,31537)

Chestnut Hill Hospital names new President and CEO (/stories/chestnut-hill-hospital-names-new-president-and-ceo,31469)



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LOCAL CALENDAR

<p>Thu, Apr 04 @3:00pm</p> <p>Build-It! Club</p> <p>Sat, Mar 30 @7:30pm</p> <p>SANCTUARY Sound Bath Saturdays</p> <p>Practice Yoga Co-op</p> <p>Sat, Mar 30 @6:00pm</p> <p>Live Music with Aaron Quarterman</p> <p>Chestnut Hill Brewery Company</p> <p>Sat, Mar 30 @8:30pm</p> <p>A Cabaret To Save Philadelphia From Climate Change</p> <p>FringeArts</p>	<p>Fri, Apr 12 @4:30pm</p> <p>Decibel Metal & Beer Fest...</p>	<p>Thu, Apr 18 @7:30pm</p> <p>Silas Stewart Sextet</p>	<p>Thu, Apr 04 @3:00pm</p> <p>Build-It! Club</p>	<p>Fri, Apr 05 @4:30pm</p> <p>Decibel Metal & Beer Fest...</p>
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All Events
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THE LATEST



Josephine Bonitatibus, 101 (/stories/josephine-bonitatibus-101,31655)

Josephine Bonitatibus, 101, passed away on Wednesday, March 27, 2024, in her daughter's home in Erdenheim surrounded by loved ones. She was born May 6, 1922, the sixth of seven ...

(/stories/josephine-bonitatibus-101,31655)



Joan Levy Coale (/stories/joan-levy-coale,31654)

Joan Levy Coale, adored mother and grandmother, lover of the arts and the Wissahickon, and resident of Mt. Airy and Chestnut Hill for nearly 100 years, died peacefully at home on February 25th, aged ...

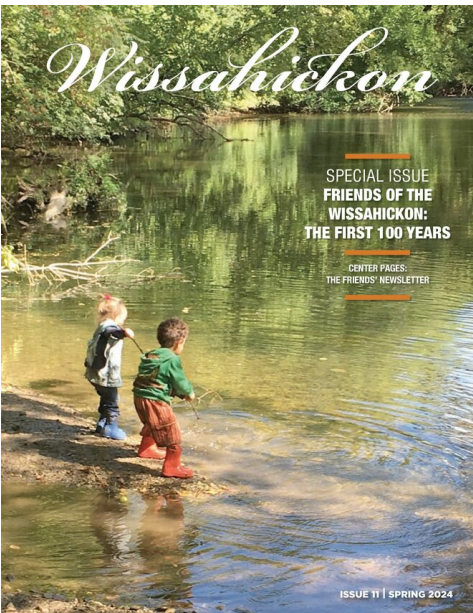
(/stories/joan-levy-coale,31654)

Alexa Kane (nee Charbonneau) (/stories/alexa-kane-nee-charbonneau,31653)

Alexa Kane (nee Charbonneau), 89, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, passed away on March 25, 2024, in the presence of her loving children. Alexa was born of the late Exilda (Pelletier) and Arthur ...



(/stories/alexa-kane-nee-charbonneau,31653)



Mar 28, 2024 issue (/stories/mar-28-2024-issue,31652)

(/stories/mar-28-2024-issue,31652)



'From Womb to Womanhood' through March 31 (/stories/from-womb-to-womanhood-through-march-31,31651)

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